

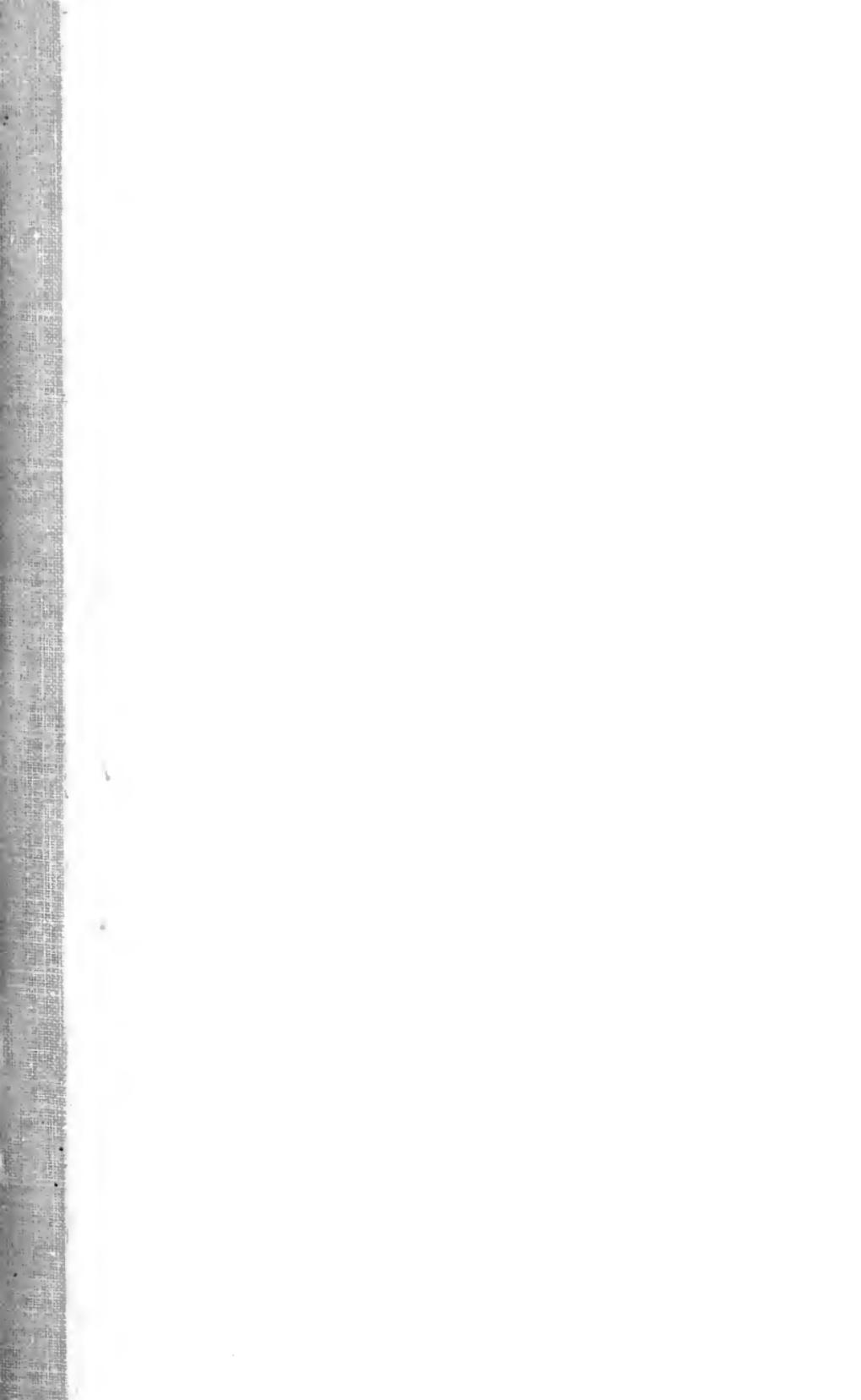
£50 FOR
A WIFE

R. L.
Gwyn.



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FIFTY POUNDS FOR A WIFE

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19th March 1904

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FIFTY POUNDS FOR A WIFE

BY

A. L. GLYN

CO-AUTHOR OF "WHAT'S HIS OFFENCE?"



BRISTOL
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FIFTY POUNDS FOR A WIFE.

CHAPTER I.

A Singular Bargain.

“**B**IRDIE, Birdie! where is the little brat? Here, child, are you deaf? The boss wants you on the boards.”

The speaker, a much be-touzled be-rouged young woman, dressed in shabby finery, stood on the lowest steps of a caravan, sending her sharp eyes and sharper voice into its dim recesses.

A splendid sunset glow was lighting the sky, flaming in the muddy pools of the fairfield, glancing like fire from the windows of the neighbouring town, and lingering in a pathway of golden glory over the quiet waters of the distant sea. It was already twilight in the caravan, and dazzled by the outside radiance, the young woman failed to discover the occupation of the little figure kneeling on the floor beside an open chest. At the sound of her voice the child started, closed the chest, and wiping her eyes, rose hastily to her feet. As she heard the message, however, she paused, hesitated for a moment, and stooping, again lifted the lid of the chest, stroking with a caressing touch of her tiny fingers a thin worn shawl and woman’s bonnet which lay at the top, and diving into a corner, brought out a little book which she pressed to her lips and thrust into the bosom of her frock. Then, again closing the chest, she moved to the entrance of the caravan.

"Look sharp! what are you fiddling over in there? Why, dang it, the child looks scared to death. Don't tell me you have seen a ghost in broad daylight." And the woman gazed, half mockingly, half curiously, at the child's form standing above her in the open doorway.

It was strangely white in the sunset glory, that pinched, sad little face looking paler still in contrast to the dusky masses of soft dark hair shading the temples, and the wistful brown eyes all too large for the sunken cheeks. There was no sparkle of childish fun, no ripple of joy or brightness; only a weary, hopeless expression, sad to see in the face of a man or woman, but infinitely pathetic in the face of a child of nine years old. Yet there was something more than sadness in it this evening—something that struck the not very observant eyes of the actress, as she stood, in her tawdry finery, at the foot of the ladder looking up at the little figure, in its rusty black frock, bathed in the golden light. The brown eyes were gleaming with positive terror, even the lips were colourless, and the whole frame was trembling so that the tiny fingers were put out to grasp the doorway for support.

"Are you mum, Birdie?" she demanded impatiently.
"Speak up, child, what ails you?"

"Nothing ails me," said the child gently. "Please, Miss Violet, may I pass? I must go to father at once."

"Humph, always the way,—never knew such a little shut-up chit. Yes, you had better be off; the boss is in a precious wax—bullied us brutally at rehearsal; you had better mind what you are after, or you'll catch it, I can tell you."

With a toss of her head the young woman turned away, leaving the child to descend the ladder, and move, with the quick light steps which had gained her in the company the nick-name she bore, over the trampled, miry ground to the booth-theatre which was now sharing the Aylsmouth fairfield

with a steam-worked merry-go-round and a troupe of performing dogs. Entering by a door at the back, the little girl groped her way to the small stage, lighted only by a flickering oil-lamp, apparently struggling for life in the vitiated atmosphere. There had been performances all the afternoon, and the company had just departed after prolonged rehearsal of a new piece, to be added to their scanty *répertoire*. No fresh air had yet penetrated into the low ill-ventilated erection, and the closeness was only diversified by a strong odour of tobacco and gin. The auditorium looked grey and dismal in the twilight, with its ranks of empty chairs ; and, at a first glance, the whole place seemed deserted. A second, however, revealed, seated at a small table in the wings, a man with a pipe in his mouth and a bottle and glass at his elbow. The light from the lamp fell on a dark, scowling face, heavy knitted brows, and yellow prominent teeth, over which the thin lips failing to meet, gave a wolfish expression to an otherwise unprepossessing countenance. Being closely shaved, the hard lines about the mouth, the length of the upper-lip, and the square, obstinate chin were fully displayed to view ; and the broad powerful figure, not tall but unusually muscular, gave Mr. Flowers something the air of a pugilist, and armed him with an authority, not altogether needless, over the wild spirits of his company, recruited from the very scum and dregs of the theatrical profession.

He must have heard the child's light steps come down the stage, but he remained motionless, gazing abstractedly at the roof, tilted back on his chair, his arms folded and his legs crossed before him. She stood in the centre of the stage silently awaiting his pleasure, her eyes fixed upon him with the helpless terror of a fascinated bird regarding a snake ; a quaint pitiful little figure, her innate air of refinement, in spite of her shabby clothes, contrasting oddly with her sordid surroundings. At length Mr. Flowers condescended to lower

his gaze, and knocking the ashes out of his pipe, uncrossed his legs and rose with an air that evidently meant business.

"Now," he said, "I will hear you your lines, though I should like to know what the blazes you meant by not learning them before. You need not think to play off your dashed laziness on me. I had enough with your mother, and I am not going to stand it from you. You will have no supper to-night for your pains. Begin!" With the playbook in his hand, he moved under the lamp, and turned over the leaves to find the part for which the child was cast. "I should like to see her do it."—"That's your cue,—now begin."

A quiver passed over the child's face; she clasped her hands and trembled from head to foot.

"Father——" she murmured timidly, when Flowers cut her short.

"Is the girl crazy?" he said with an oath. "You don't dare to tell me you have not learned your part now?"

"It is not that," she burst out desperately. "I have learned it, but I cannot play it unless it is altered. I promised mother before she died—you heard me, father—that I would never use bad language, and my part is swearing from beginning to end."

Flowers looked at her in amazement. He had only once before known his daughter venture to dispute his wishes, and that was when she had implored him, on her knees, to send for a doctor for his dying wife.

"When your mother was alive, did she ever set herself up against me?" he demanded, with a threatening scowl. "No. Then you may take your oath she won't do it now she is dead. If I choose you to swear, you shall swear, or I will know the reason why. Begin this moment!"

There was silence, broken only by the distant sound of

voices and laughter from the merry-go-round, and the strains of the "Sweetheart" waltz to which it turned unceasingly :

" Oh ! love for a year, a week, a day,
But alas for the love which loves alway."

The child's heart was beating almost to suffocation with dread and terror, but she neither moved nor spoke. She was resolved to die sooner than break the promise made to her dead mother—a promise rendered doubly sacred by the love she bore her ; yet she would rather have thrown herself under an express train than thus have faced her father and refused to obey his will.

He took a step forward, fixing his dark, scowling eyes upon her face.

" Did you hear me, Winifred ?" he said in an ominous tone. " I shall not speak to you again,—begin !"

Still there was silence in the darkened theatre. The "Sweetheart" waltz ground on outside, and the children's laughter floated on the evening air. Flowers waited ; he was so accustomed to inspiring fear and submission, it seemed to him incredible that the child should dare to disobey him—a little slip of a thing that he could knock down with one of his fingers. He positively could not believe it, and thought her too frightened to speak, until through the terror he read the quiet steadfastness of her face which set him and his commands at nought.

With a furious oath he turned on his heel and hurried from the theatre, leaving the child, sick and faint with dread, clinging for support to the woodwork of the wings. She believed that he would kill her for her disobedience, and it seemed an eternity as she waited for his return, while the "Sweetheart" waltz continued, and the voices of those happy, careless children were borne to her ears upon the evening breeze. Life was so bright to them, out under the golden sunset ; while

to her alone in the dreary theatre, her only hope was to die and join her mother—the mother for whose love and loss Winifred had been crying her heart out these three long bitter months. Where was her mother now? Would she be watching for her child? Did she know what her promise was costing her; suppose they missed each other in the wide pathless heavens? And then from the dreamy reverie into which she was drifting, Winifred woke with a throb of mental agony to the dread consciousness of the present. Death was not terrible to her, for she had seen her mother die; but from what she must be called upon to suffer before death came to her release, every fibre of the child's sensitive nature recoiled with shuddering horror and dismay. She was too well acquainted with her father's fierce tyrannical nature to look for any mercy at his hands.

"Oh, mother help me!" she cried in a very abandonment of misery, pressing her hands over the little book in her bosom as if some mystic comfort could be derived from the touch. Then she drew in her breath with a quick sobbing gasp, and her little fingers locked together as in a vice, for she heard the sound of heavy returning footsteps, and knew that the moment of retribution had come.

Looking more like a demon than a man, Flowers advanced out of the gloom of the background, a red gleam in his eyes, his black brows knitted in a savage scowl, and his lips drawn back until the yellow teeth seemed to grin in ghastly mockery. In his hand he carried a heavy riding-whip with a long supple lash.

Without a word, he caught Winifred by her hair and drew her unresistingly to the centre of the stage.

"Now," he exclaimed with an oath, "I'll teach you to disobey your father, you impudent little hussy!"

Raising his arm, the lash hissed through the air, and fell with cruel force upon the child's shoulders. She winced

painfully under the blow, and drew in her breath with a little shuddering sob, but she uttered no cry nor appeal for mercy. Experience had taught her the uselessness of the latter ; and long ago she had schooled herself to endure her father's punishments in silence, that the sound of her cries might not add to her mother's distress. There was no mother now to suffer with her pain, and weep hot tears of helpless pity over her child ; but habit was strong, and Winifred's nature had a touch of pride which made her instinctively try to hide her sufferings.

Again and again the lash descended, and the tears, which she could not keep back, streamed silently down the child's cheeks. Flowers was furious with his daughter's disobedience, and determined to read her a lesson which she should not soon forget ; but at length he paused, and sweeping back the hair from her brow, bent to look into the little face drawn and flushed with pain.

"Have you had enough ?" he demanded with a sneer. "I have paid you out for your cheek. Now you can begin your lines ; and if you miss one single word, so much the worse for you."

"I can't, I can't," she murmured in a trembling voice ; "only let me off the swearing, father, and I will learn anything you like."

Flowers was astounded, he could hardly believe his ears. This unexpected contumacy took him completely by surprise ; the child must be mad to defy him after the punishment she had received.

"So you have not had enough !" he exclaimed with an angry snarl that made him look more like a wolf than ever. "We will see which tires first, my girl, you or I. You confounded little fool, do you think you are going to get the better of me ?"

He raised the whip again, and a rain of blows fell on the

helpless child. He was too angry to consider the difference between her frail little form, and the hulking stable-boys for whom that whip was usually reserved ; and when he paused at last, Winifred was deathly pale and shivering, and only kept from falling by his grasp on her arm.

"Will you obey me ?" he demanded through his clenched teeth.

Her strength was failing, and the torture of the lash was almost more than she could bear ; but she thought of her mother, and summoned all her resolution to reply :

"I can't break my promise."

"Then I'll kill you ;" and, beside himself with rage, Flowers would most probably have proceeded to carry his threat into execution, when an unexpected interruption occurred.

Several moments previously the call-boy had opened the stage-door and advanced a few steps into the building before, discovering what was going on, he beat a very prompt retreat.

"Reckon you must wait a bit, sir," he said with a grin to someone outside. "Flowers is a leathering the gal, and I dursn't interrupt him for my life !"

"What ?" said the person addressed, with an astonished air ; and, without waiting for an answer, he pushed open the door, and unceremoniously groped his way on to the stage.

He came in sight of the two occupants just as Flowers, having delivered a particularly vicious blow, paused to put the question to his daughter. The intruder stopped, listened to the child's reply and the threat which followed it ; then, as Flowers again raised the whip, he sprang forward and caught him by the arm.

"You brute ! strike her again if you dare !"

Flowers dropped his hand in amazement. Before him stood

a stranger—a tall, fair-haired young fellow of one or two and twenty, regarding the manager with a perfect blaze of indignation in his bright grey eyes. Rapping out an oath, the first articulate exclamation which rose to his lips, Flowers was about to furiously demand the other's business, when the stranger stooped, coolly threw off the grasp which Flowers still retained on Winifred's shoulder, and put his arm tenderly round the child.

"Poor little thing! he has half killed you as it is. I wish to heaven I had got in before. Don't tremble so, little one; he shall not touch you again."

"Who the devil are you?" demanded Flowers furiously.

"My name is Gerald Daubeny, and I came here to buy tickets for this evening's performance. Who does this child belong to?"

"To me," snarled the manager, divided between his business instinct of civility to a patron and his anger at the unceremonious interruption.

"You are not her father?" and the young man glanced incredulously from the manager's coarse, brutal countenance to the delicate little face resting against his arm.

"I am; and I will trouble you to leave her alone, Mr. Daubeny. Business is business. I will give you the tickets if you will do me the honour of stepping outside."

"What! and leave you to come back and murder the child at your leisure? Not exactly." And lifting Winifred gently in his arms, the stranger placed her in the chair by the table. "It is my business to see that you are, at least, bound over to keep the peace," he continued, calmly turning to Flowers; "although, if the magistrate does his duty, my friend, it strikes me you will spend the next three months at the treadmill."

Mr. Daubeny's perfect coolness, the stinging contempt of his tone, and the scornful smile which accompanied the

words, goaded the manager, little accustomed to opposition, into complete disregard of consequences. Swearing violently, he sprang upon the speaker, aiming a savage blow at his head with the butt-end of his whip. The next moment the whip was wrested from his hand, and Flowers found himself pinned in the grasp of an athlete decidedly his superior in strength and height. The manager was in bad condition, and having failed in his first attack, would gladly have retreated; but his struggles were powerless to release him, and he struck out wildly at his opponent, who continued with absolute coolness to act solely on the defensive. Not until Mr. Flowers was breathless and exhausted by his fruitless efforts did the other free his right hand, which held the whip, and shifting his grasp to the manager's collar, proceed to administer a sound thrashing to his vanquished assailant.

Winifred looked on with breathless dismay. Her father was tyrant supreme over the only world she knew, and that anyone should dare to treat him in this fashion rendered her fairly speechless with bewilderment and fear. Slipping off the chair, she approached her champion with imploring face and stretched-out hands.

"Oh, please, please stop! He will be so angry when you are gone."

The young man stayed his hand, and looked down at the child with a kindly smile.

"Never you fear, little one. Run away, and leave him to me. This will do him a world of good; and I'll not let him out of sight till he is locked up in the station."

"Let me off, and I will swear not to lay a finger on the child again," blubbered Flowers, thoroughly subdued, for, like all bullies, he was a coward at heart. "If you thrash me, and send for the police, she shall pay for it when I am free."

"I can't trust your word. Look here, little one, have you no mother, nor anyone to take your part?"

"Mother is dead," said Winifred, with quivering lips, "and I have no one in the world but father."

There was something so pathetic in the wistful brown eyes, the sad, patient little face, that a sudden moisture clouded the bright eyes looking down upon it.

"You are a nice sort of fellow to have the keeping of a delicate child," he said, with strong disgust, eyeing the broad figure now powerless in his iron grasp. "I suppose her life is insured, and the sooner you are rid of her the better."

"She is not worth the bread she eats," muttered Flowers sullenly. "I would be rid of her any day for £50."

"Done with you. Give me a pen, and the bargain's struck."

The same moment Flowers found himself released, and staggering back, he gazed in amazement at his vanquisher.

"You will give me £50 for Winifred?"

He could hardly believe it a *bonâ fide* offer. To be relieved of a troublesome, almost useless, encumbrance, and receive £50, a sum sufficient to free him from the embarrassments which at that moment were pressing somewhat heavily upon the manager's shoulders! It seemed too good to be true.

"I will, and let you off further punishment into the bargain. If you ever dare to reclaim her, we'll square accounts, so you know what to expect;" and unbuttoning his coat as he spoke, Mr. Daubeny took a cheque-book out of his pocket.

He seemed to take the transaction so entirely as a matter of course, that Flowers watched his proceedings in stupid wonder, only wishing that he had said £100 instead of £50.

Striking a match to discover the whereabouts of the door by which he had entered, the young man walked towards it; and the call-boy, whose ear had been hitherto glued to the post, was retreating with marvellous promptitude, when an authoritative voice called after him:

"Hi, boy! where are you bolting to? Fetch me ink and paper, and ask two gentlemen of the company to be so good as to come and witness Mr. Flowers' signature."

The surprising news that a stranger had been found to fight the manager in his den had already spread amongst the caravans, and two "gentlemen" in shirt-sleeves were prompt in presenting themselves upon the scene of action, where the sight of their dreaded task-master, cowering sullenly under the eye of his tall aristocratic-looking conqueror, proved a panacea to their down-trodden souls for many a day to come.

Mr. Daubeny greeted them courteously, and explained that he had ventured to request the honour of their presence as witnesses to a small transaction between Mr. Flowers and himself. Whilst he spoke, he had taken his seat at the table, and rapidly writing some words at the head of a sheet of paper, took a postage stamp from his pocket and stuck it on below.

"Now, you will sign this," he said, rising and fixing his clear eyes on the manager's face, which fell under his gaze; and the man dropped sullenly into the vacant chair.

On the paper he read the words: "Received of Gerald Daubeny the sum of £50 for my daughter Winifred, which sum I engage to refund if at any future time I remove her from his charge."

"Make it £100, and I will sign it," he said eagerly.

"You will sign what I have written," returned Mr. Daubeny with decision; "or I shall refer the matter to the police. Whichever you prefer."

Flowers yielded; his blustering nature was no match for his opponent's coolness, and the singular document was duly signed and witnessed. Mr. Daubeny folded and placed it in his pocket-book, handing the manager in exchange his cheque for £50.

"How am I to know this will be honoured?" growled Flowers dubiously.

"Go into the town and enquire. I can wait till you come back; I am in no particular hurry. Good-evening, gentlemen;" and bowing to the departing witnesses, the young man seated himself in the manager's chair, and looked round for the child.

His easy manner reassured Flowers, who considered that the sooner he was quit of such an awkward customer the better.

"All right, I'll trust you," he said gruffly. "Can't have you sitting there on my stage; it's wanted."

"I hope the next play will be as interesting to the audience as the scene in which I have just taken part," returned Mr. Daubeny with a curl of his handsome lip. "Come, little one, where are you? Do you know," he added, with a gentleness in curious contrast to his manner to Flowers, as the child came tremblingly out of the shadow—"do you know you belong to me now? Shall you be afraid to go away with me?"

Winifred started, glancing with trembling apprehension at her father. In her bewilderment she had comprehended nothing of the singular bargain by which she had been sold by Flowers and bought by a stranger for the sum of £50; he met the look by an angry scowl.

"I am rid of you, little fool! Go to your new master. I wish him joy of your cursed cheek, that's all;" and turning on his heel, the manager strode out of the theatre.

"It is true, little one; I could not leave you with that brute," said the young man gently. "You are not afraid of me, child, are you?"

And Winifred, looking straight into the kind eyes bent upon her, began to realise the amazing truth that she was delivered from the tyranny which from babyhood had

crushed and tortured her young life with pitiless cruelty and wrong. Never a kind word had she received from her father, only blows and curses, and the bitter anguish of seeing her mother droop and pine under his harshness and neglect. She drew a long breath, a flush dyed her cheeks, and her wan little face grew transformed in the light of the rapturous joy which kindled in her eyes.

"Afraid of you? I think you are God's angel!" she cried impetuously; and then, ashamed of her involuntary outburst, she bent her head, and kissed the hand which had gathered her tiny fingers into its firm, strong clasp.

"A queer angel, little one," and a gleam of amusement crossed the young man's face; "but I give you my word," he added earnestly, "you shall never repent your trust in me. I will be your friend all the days of my life. Come, I can't breathe in here; let us get out of this stuffy hole." *

And hand-in-hand the two passed from the dark, close theatre out under the wide blue heavens, where the first stars were glimmering overhead, and a tender primrose gloaming shone in the western sky.

CHAPTER II.

Philanthropy under Difficulties.



IVE miles from the town of Aylsmouth, at the head of a wooded gully sloping to the sea, stood a solitary house, bowered in creepers and half-hidden by graceful beech trees. It was too small for a landowner's residence, too large for a labourer's cottage, and was clearly no farmhouse, as the sole outbuildings consisted of a compact little stable and coachhouse, with rooms overhead for the coachman. Originally a bachelor's shooting-box, a wing had been added: and the pretty drawing-room, with its flowers and knick-knacks; the garden, with its smooth, green lawn and ribbon-border of flowers, now in all the pride of their September bloom, unwithered by the autumn frosts, told of home and a woman's presence. A gravel drive led from the house to a lane, which wound by pasture field and covert to the village of Dering, about a mile away. Sewards, a steep path under the beeches descended through turf and bracken, by the margin of a bright little stream, to the shore of a bay, guarded on either hand by steep precipitous rocks. It was the only break for miles in the beetling wall of cliffs, and from its lonely situation the house above had stood a long time empty, until some three years previously it had been taken by its present tenants.

Night had closed in, a mild starry night, upon which the rosy lamplight from the drawing-room streamed through the uncurtained windows. The room had only one human occupant—a woman lying upon an invalid couch, furnished with a movable table, lamp, and reading stand, all the appliances

of Carter's latest patent. A book was open on the stand before her, and as she read the shaded lamplight flashed from the rings on her white fingers and gleamed on the steel needles as a man's sock grew beneath her busy hands. On a rug beside the couch, snoring the sleep of the just, lay an animal apparently of the sheep-dog species, so far as his mongrel points and extreme ugliness could be assigned to any recognised breed. His snores were echoed from another rug amicably shared between a large black cat with half a tail and a small sandy terrier minus a hind foot, while a curious sound from the window proceeded from a covered cage, containing a sleeping jackdaw with a broken leg neatly splinted and bandaged. The snoring of the animals kept pace with the ticking of the clock, for the house was very still; and through the open window came only the whisper of the beech-leaves in the soft night breeze, and the low soughing of the waves upon the shore.

Suddenly the drawing-room door opened with a jerk, and a stout, portly woman, with a very red perturbed face, appeared upon the threshold.

"If you please, ma'am, here's Tomlins met Farmer Noakes just come from Aylsmouth, and he heard Mr. Gerald at the Bull say he was not going to stop to dinner, and order the cart at once to come home; and really, begging your pardon, ma'am, he might have more consideration, with nothing in the house but a chicken's leg and bone of mutton."

"Good gracious, Elliot!" and the invalid looked up with a start. "Suppose he is ill, or some accident has happened!"

"It is nothing of the sort, ma'am, so don't you go putting yourself about. Tomlins says Farmer Noakes said particular that Mr. Gerald looked just as usual; but to come home at past eight o'clock, and expect dinner, with nothing in the house but a chick——"

"Never mind, Elliot," and Gerald's mother smiled into the old servant's face, the bright sunny smile which her son had inherited from her, "Mr. Gerald is not particular, you know. Make him an omelette, and he will be quite satisfied to share the mutton-bone with Grim; but I do trust," she added in a low tone half to herself, "that there is nothing wrong."

Turning her head, she gazed anxiously out into the darkness, straining her ears for the first sound of horse-hoofs in the lane, a little flush in her fair sweet face, curiously youthful for her age, as not a touch of grey was discernible in her shining hair, and her complexion was pure as a girl's.

"Hark!" she said eagerly, "there he is."

At the same moment the big dog sprang up with a joyous bark, and the terrier yapped in response, his demonstration ending, however, in a dismal squeal, as the cat, resenting the disturbance, soundly boxed his ears.

Mrs. Elliot went to open the door, and the dogs rushed tumultuously into the hall, while the black cat, with an injured air, curled herself round upon the rug. Mrs. Daubeny, unable to move from her couch, lay with eager eyes fixed upon the door, which Elliot had left open behind her. She heard the dog-cart stop before the house, and her son's ringing tones greeting the old servant gaily and brightly as usual. Then, to her dismay, there was a smothered shriek from Elliot, and an excited—

"Bless my heart alive! Mr. Gerald, what have you got there?"

"Don't be afraid, it won't bite. Here, little one, I'll lift you down."

The next moment the young man's step sounded in the hall, and he entered the drawing-room carrying something in his arms, carefully wrapped in a shawl. Crossing the room, he sat down in a low chair by his mother's couch, and bent over to kiss her.

"You won't mind, little mother, will you? I have brought you rather a queer find this time—look!"

The shawl was thrown back, and Mrs. Daubeny saw, to her intense amazement, a child lying in her son's arms—a child with a white, weary little face, the eyes closed, and the long dark lashes resting on the thin cheeks.

"Good heavens, Gerald, the poor little thing looks half dead!" she exclaimed compassionately. "Where did you find her? Was she lost on the downs?"

"No, I did not exactly find her. Down, Grim!" as the big dog came sniffing suspiciously round the burden in his master's arms. "Get me a little soup or beef tea, or something to give her, will you, Elliot?" and he looked up at the woman, who, in burning curiosity, had followed him into the room.

And Elliot was not the only curious person; for behind her broad shoulders appeared the head of a servant-girl, and the doorway was blocked by Tomlins, the old man who officiated as groom and gardener, and who was now actually permitting the mare to wait unattended at the stable-door while he stared with all his eyes at the strange sight of his young master with a child on his knee.

"Wherever did you find her, Mr. Gerald?" demanded Elliot, evidently determined to satisfy her curiosity before she stirred a step to comply with his request.

Seeing the same question in his mother's eyes, Gerald thought it advisable to offer an explanation forthwith.

"There is a travelling theatre set up on the Aylsmouth fairfield, and I and the other fellows rather thought of going to-night for fun, so I went round before dinner to see about tickets. They told me the manager was in the theatre, and a boy was sent to fetch him; but he seemed to funk going in, so I went instead, and found a great drunken brute of a man laying into this poor little mite with a whip that would have

felled an ox. He said she was his daughter; but as there did not seem a soul to look after her, I squared the matter, and brought her off with me."

"My dear boy, that was very rash," remonstrated Mrs. Daubeny, with a perplexed face. "What are you going to do with her?"

"The same as the old woman who lived in a shoe," said Gerald with a laugh. "Give her some broth without any bread, and . . . send her to bed. She has had the whipping already, poor little thing! Now, Elliot, what have you got for us?"

"Well, really, Mr. Gerald, what you will be expecting next! Beef-tea doesn't grow in the garden, and I can assure you there is nothing in the house but a chicken's leg and a bone of mutton."

"Oh, yes there is! That wonderful kitchen of yours will produce anything required. I am coming to overhaul it in a moment. Charlotte," turning to the younger servant, "run upstairs and get my room ready, there's a good girl, and then you shall put the child to bed."

"In your room, Gerald?"

His mother was looking at him, an evident trouble in her eyes.

"She is dead beat, poor little lass; I can't keep her waiting about. I will go in the spare room, on the sofa, if the bed is not ready; it is all the same to me." He laid his hand with a gentle caressing touch on the soft dark hair, and Winifred, who was almost asleep, and utterly worn out with fatigue and pain, opened her eyes, and looked up at him with a faint wan smile. "There, that's right; we have got to the end of our journey, little one. Now you shall come to bed."

He carried her off upstairs, whither Charlotte had already preceded him. Tomlins hurried to the stables, and Elliot,

having delivered herself of a “Well, to be sure, ma’am, as if dogs and cats weren’t work enough, that the young master must needs bring home a beggar’s brat, and expect to find beef-tea and broth waiting for it, when there is nothing in the house but a chicken’s leg and a bone of mutton,” retired, with a toss of her head and an aggrieved air, to the kitchen.

Gerald’s mother was left alone, as before, with the black cat, the only member of the household who had remained unmoved by the general excitement, and who now sat upright on the rug blinking her yellow eyes at her mistress, as if in dignified sympathy with her evident uneasiness.

Mrs. Daubeny was naturally seriously disturbed by the advent of the caravan child. She was quite accustomed to the waifs and strays which her son, with his impulsive kindness and warm heart, was constantly bringing to the house. She had received without a murmur stray dogs, half-drowned cats, wounded birds, even the emaciated donkey, all scars and bones, which Gerald had purchased for ten shillings from a drunken costermonger, and turned out for the rest of its days in the meadow behind the house. But a child—and, above all, a girl child—was a very different matter. She knew the young man would wish to keep his *protégée* in the house; and Gerald, with his handsome face and laughing words, invariably succeeded in getting his own way. His mother was so proud of his good looks and tall, athletic figure, and so grateful to him for the sacrifice he had made in living at home with her, that she could deny him nothing.

It was three years now since the terrible carriage accident, in which Colonel Daubeny had been killed on the spot, and his wife had received the injury to her spine which had rendered her an invalid for life; while Gerald, on the eve of entering Sandhurst, found himself orphaned and

almost penniless. Only a small yearly income remained to the widow, for Colonel Daubeny had incurred heavy debts in his youth, which had crippled his resources; and the boy's first thought had been to get through his year at Sandhurst and obtain an Indian commission, which would enable him to live upon his pay. It seemed impossible that he could be anything but a soldier, like his father before him: all his hopes and associations were connected with a military life. Yet it went to his heart to leave his mother, in the first shock of her illness and widowhood, bereft of both her husband and son.

In this dilemma, he had received through an uncle, his father's elder brother, Sir Rawdon Daubeny, the offer of a clerkship in the principal Aylsmouth Bank, with the promise of promotion in time to the rank of partner. From his soul Gerald loathed a business life, but, after a hard struggle, he had made up his mind to accept it for the sake of his mother, doing his best to hide from her what the decision cost him.

They had moved accordingly to Aylsmouth, renting Beechhaven Cottage, the house on the cliffs, that Mrs. Daubeny might have a garden, which she loved, and Gerald obtain as much fresh air as possible, riding in and out from the town. He had feared, at first, that his mother would be lonely in his absence; but the name of Daubeny was sufficient passport in the country side, and the invalid widow, with her bright, social nature, excited general sympathy and interest: so that there were few days on which no carriage was seen waiting before the little porch. Living very quietly and simply, their income, increased by Gerald's earnings, proved just sufficient for their wants; but there was little to spare, certainly not enough to justify them in adopting a child, and Mrs. Daubeny's face grew very grave as she reflected on possible consequences.

"I must persuade Gerald to board her out at some cottage,

and let her be brought up for a servant," she resolved; "although I know the boy will spoil her, in any case."

She had just arrived at this conclusion, when her son re-entered the room, followed by the two dogs, and, with a decidedly deprecating air, took his usual seat at her side.

"Poor little mother, I know I have upset you frightfully, but I really could not help it; now, could I?" and his eyes sought her face with a most engaging expression of appeal.

Mrs. Daubeny smiled involuntarily, but she answered gravely:

"I fear you do not realise the responsibility you have undertaken, my dear boy. Now tell me all about it."

Gerald obeyed, artfully trying to work on his mother's feelings by dilating at length on the scene he had witnessed in the theatre; painting in eager words the father's brutality and the child's courage and endurance. He was secretly dreading the confession of the bargain he had struck with the manager; and when at last he blurted it out, in evident confusion, Mrs. Daubeny threw up her hands in dismay.

"Gerald! how could you? £50! What is to become of your Italian tour?"

"I must scratch, that's all. The other fellows won't mind; they are quite enough without me."

"But you have been looking forward to it all the year. My dear boy, it is very sweet and unselfish of you; but there is reason in all things. What claim has this caravan child on you, that you should give up your holiday and burden yourself with her maintenance, to relieve her drunken father? It puts a premium on brutality and drunkenness."

"Don't be vexed, little mother. That is all very sensible and true; but you know I never could understand political economy and that sort of thing. And if you had been in the theatre instead of me, and seen the look in the child's face,

you would have given up ten holidays and any number of theories to get her away from that brute. I know you would, mother."

Mrs. Daubeny looked dubious, but she left the statement unquestioned, and promptly shifted her ground.

"What are you going to do with her, Gerald? She is too young to take Charlotte's place at present."

"Mother!" There was amazed indignation in the young man's tone. "Make a servant of her! You would not dream of it if you had seen her properly and heard her speak. That child is a lady, if ever there was one."

Mrs. Daubeny raised her eyebrows.

"Gerald dear, are you bewitched? A child from a caravan!"

"I don't care. Her mother must have been a lady, and the child worshipped her. I expect the father has come down in the world. His language was vile, but he neither dropped his h's nor mangled his grammar. Wait till you have seen her, mother. I am sure you will take to the poor little mite."

"But, even if she is all you think, what are Elliot and I to do with a child in the house all day? Elliot is an old servant, and ought to be considered. You know she sacrificed a good deal to remain with us."

"I will get round Elliot, don't you fear," said Gerald, with calm confidence; "and my holiday begins next week, so I will take the kid off your hands for a month, I promise you."

"Nonsense!" and Mrs. Daubeny laughed, in spite of her vexation. "The idea of your staying at home to play nurse-maid to a child! You must go to your uncle's and get some shooting, as you have done yourself out of Italy; and there are lots of visits you can pay in the regiment."

"Not this autumn," said Gerald, decidedly. "I have

not saddled myself with a child to turn all the trouble over to you. I am going to stay at home and enjoy my new toy. I shall take her out in the *Petrel*, if she is anything of a sailor, and get some colour into those little white cheeks. Look here, mother," and he took the signed paper from his pocket-book, "will you keep this for me? You know I lose everything I possess."

"I know you give away everything you possess. St. Martin was nothing to you," said Mrs. Daubeny, with a troubled smile. "My dear boy, what is the object of this extraordinary receipt?"

"Don't you see?" said Gerald, triumphantly, for he was immensely proud of his diplomacy. "That is the hold I have over the fellow. A father can't legally sell his rights over his child. He has the power of claiming her at any time; but then I can sue him for the money. So, if she grows up a pretty girl, and he takes a fancy to have her back in his miserable theatre, he will have to fork out £50. The beggar will hardly risk that, I reckon."

"No," said Mrs. Daubeny, thoughtfully. "Then you really intend, Gerald, to educate the child as a lady? It will be a great expense; and what is to happen if you want to marry?"

"I shall not marry," said Gerald, with decision; "not until I can support a wife, as well as little Winifred. She shall always come first, next to you, mother; and you will help me to look after her and bring her up properly, won't you? If she only grows up like you, I'll marry her myself!" and, with a merry laugh, he bent his handsome head over the couch, and conquered Mrs. Daubeny's last remnants of opposition by a warm embrace.

CHAPTER III.

From Hades to Elysium.

WHEN Winifred opened her eyes the next morning, her first idea was that she must be dreaming. Never in waking life had she seen anything so charming as the little bedroom, with its papered walls and carpeted floor; the quaint bits of furniture and pottery which Gerald had delighted in picking up in the old shops at Aylsmouth; the fresh chintz curtains, and the flower-decked table. It could not be real, she thought; but her little hand stole timidly out and touched the pretty counterpane, thus obtaining practical proof of the tangibility of her surroundings. Then perhaps she had died, and this was heaven; for since her mother's death the imagination of the lonely child had dwelt upon the future world, until it had grown to her as a living, vivid reality. It must be heaven, she decided; and with a blissful sense of rest and peace, she lay still, wishing that her mother would come to see her. She would go and look for her presently, when she was not quite so tired. The door opened softly, as it had opened more than once that morning; somebody looked into the room, and, meeting the child's bewildered gaze, came quickly across to the bed.

"Awake at last, little one. How do you feel this morning?"

Winifred started. The bright face and pleasant voice brought back in a confused rush to her mind the events of the preceding day.

"Where am I?" she asked, wonderingly. "I thought this was heaven!"

"Not exactly," and Gerald smiled. "It is my mother's house. Are you disappointed to find yourself still on earth?"

Winifred pushed back the hair from her brows, and regarded him with a grave, perplexed expression, which gradually gave place to one of restful satisfaction and content. A smile dawned in her wistful brown eyes, and she stretched out her hand confidently.

"I am so happy to be with you," she said, simply. "It seems too good to be true. But you will not"—and a look of fear and anxiety woke in her face—"you will not keep me always?"

"Always, little one; never you fear. I'll not give you up to your brute of a father. This is your home, and you shall be my little sister. Why, child, what is the matter?" and he looked with consternation at the tears which suddenly overflowed Winifred's eyes.

"Nothing," she sobbed; "only, you are so very good, and I am so happy. I don't know what to do."

"But that is nothing to cry over," he said brightly, touched by the passionate gratitude of her tone. "Come, you are flooding my cherished counterpane, and it is not warranted to stand salt water. I really can't allow my property to be spoilt in this fashion."

She checked her tears in a moment, and looked up startled, thinking he was in earnest, until his smile reassured her.

"There, that is better. Now I must be off to my desk at Aylsmouth. Charlotte will bring you your breakfast, and here is a book for you to look at. Be a good girl, and do what you are told, till I come back this evening."

He kissed her, and hurrying out of the room, dashed in to bid "good-bye" to his mother.

"You must take that child in hand," he said; "she positively does not understand a joke, and her eyes haunt me:

they are so unutterably sad, as if she had never known a bit of happiness or fun in her life. You must help me, mother, to put a little sunshine into them. I can't stand a death's-head on the premises."

With a laugh, which covered the feeling Gerald was too much of an Englishman to care to reveal, he ran downstairs and jumped into the cart, in which Mrs. Elliot's portly form was already ensconced, while Tomlins, on his young master's appearance, scrambled up behind; Elliot having nobly consented to go to Aylsmouth at the risk of her neck, for she strongly distrusted Gerald and his mare, to buy clothes for the little waif. Gerald had lost no time in winning the servants over to his side, but he was secretly dreading his mother's first interview with the child, lest Mrs. Daubeny's displeasure at her son's sacrifice of his holiday plans should be visited on the innocent cause. Mrs. Daubeny was a very kind-hearted woman, but the circumstances were undoubtedly trying, and it was scarcely to be expected she should share her son's impulsive chivalry.

It was not until late in the afternoon that, feeling the air chilly in the garden, Mrs. Daubeny summoned Tomlins to wheel her couch through the French window into the drawing-room, and then turned to Elliot with the question:

"Is the child dressed?"

"She has been dressed this long while, ma'am, sitting in Mr. Gerald's room with her book, as quiet as a little mouse. I must say she's as good as gold, but one does not know how long it will last;" and Elliot shook her head portentously, as she removed and folded the shawl her mistress had worn in the garden.

"I think I should like to see her. I suppose she does not look so frightfully ill as she did last night?"

"She is not much to boast of ma'am; nothing but skin and bone. I was in two minds as to getting her up at all;

but she begged so pretty to be dressed, I let her have her will. She has been nearly beaten to death, and that's the fact; but she tells me, in the quietest way, she is quite used to it. That father of hers ought to be hung." Elliot gave a vindictive push to an unoffending arm-chair, and proceeded to adjust the table and reading-stand. "Shall I bring her down, ma'am?" she asked, when the task was accomplished to her satisfaction.

"Yes," said Mrs. Daubeny, with a victimised air. "I must see her some time, I suppose, and it is too late now for visitors; but tell Charlotte to fetch her at once if anyone should call."

Taking up her knitting, she opened the book she was reading, and was already immersed in the pages when Elliot, who had spent the interim in vigorously brushing Winifred's already smooth hair, ushered the child into the room.

"Go to the mistress, my dear," she said, pointing towards the couch; and, hurrying away, shut the door behind her.

Shyly the child obeyed, not venturing to raise her eyes as she crept across the room. She wore a plain black frock, which Elliot had purchased ready-made in Aylsmouth, and her hair was tied with a black ribbon. She looked such a timid, pitiful little thing, so frail and slender, that Mrs. Daubeny forgot her prejudices on the spot.

"Come here, my child; you need not be afraid of me," she said kindly. And Winifred, glancing up at the fair, sweet face and the grey eyes that were so like Gerald's, took confidence, and put her little fingers trustingly into the thin white hand extended towards her. Mrs. Daubeny drew Winifred forward and kissed her. Something in the wistful appeal of the soft, gazelle-like eyes went straight to the mother's heart. She understood what Gerald meant. It was strange, indeed, to see such a mournful expression on the face of a child. "So

you have come to be my little girl," she said. "Shall you like to stay with us, Winifred?"

Winifred's face spoke for her; it lighted up with an eager flush of delight.

"If I might be your little servant," she said, earnestly. "I used to do everything for mother when she was ill. I am so sorry I am so small; but I could go your errands, if you would let me."

The timid words, the pretty deprecating manner, charmed even Mrs. Daubeny's fastidious taste.

"We will see about that by-and-by," she answered, smilingly. "You must grow strong first; you look as if a breath of wind would blow you away."

"But, indeed, I am very strong," protested the child eagerly: "I am never ill at all, only tired. There was always so much to do."

"Why, what could a mite like you do? There, don't stand any longer. Take that stool, it will just fit you, and come and tell me all about it. How long have you lived in a caravan?"

"I think it must be two years," said Winifred, knitting her pencilled brows in thought. "Father used to act before that in a theatre in London, and we had rooms at the top of a big, dirty house, so black and smoky. It used to make mother so tired, going up those dreadful stairs. We were glad to change to the caravan."

"And what did you do in London—go to school?"

"There was no time. Mother taught me to read and write; and I used to help her with the work, when I was not at the theatre. She used to act herself sometimes, but she had to make all the costumes for father and me; and when they changed the piece very often, she had to sit up all night to work."

"And what did you do at the theatre? You don't mean to say you acted, a baby like you?"

"Yes," said Winifred, in surprise. "I have acted ever since I can remember, in pantomimes and plays."

"But surely you had some time to yourself for games?"

"I was always tired," she answered, half apologetically. "When there was any spare time, and I could not help mother, I used to go to sleep."

"You like acting, I suppose?"

"I don't like it at all," said the child, wearily. "It was easy when mother taught me, and told me what to do; but I am so stupid myself. I never seem to know how to look and speak. Father's so angry, because he says I am such a stick. If I have a part I understand, I can do it better; but it all seems so foolish and untrue. I cannot think why people go to see plays."

Mrs. Daubeny looked wonderingly at the little speaker. The words and tone would have been suitable in the mouth of a worn-out woman. They came strangely indeed from a child.

"What did you do in the caravan, when you were not acting?" she asked.

"I had to make the beds and help with the cooking, and sweep and dust and—"

"But, my dear child, was there none to do the work but you?"

"They expected me to do it; but they did not mind how things were left. It always made mother uncomfortable to see untidiness and dust, and I tried to go on with her ways," said Winifred, in a very low voice.

Then she slipped suddenly off her stool, moved to the window, and, to Mrs. Daubeny's surprise, noiselessly adjusted the blind to exclude a sunbeam which was slanting in the invalid's eyes.

"You are a dear girl," said Gerald's mother, laying her hand softly on the child's shoulder, as Winifred returned to

her seat; "but as my old nurse used to say, 'You are an old woman before you are a young one.' Do you never laugh, my child?"

"I don't know," answered Winifred, looking up in some perplexity at the question. "I have to when it is in my part, but I can't laugh well," she added naively. "Father has often beaten me because I did it so badly."

"Which I should think he found a highly efficacious means of improving you in the art," remarked Mrs. Daubeny dryly. "Now, here is Charlotte with the tea. Watch how she makes it, Winifred; and you shall pour it out for me yourself to-morrow."

Gerald's return home was somewhat later than usual, as he had walked from Aylsmouth, the dogcart having brought back Mrs. Elliot; and it was with considerable misgiving that he entered the drawing-room to learn how it had fared with his little *protégée*. He was hardly prepared for the sight which met his eyes of Winifred fast asleep on her stool, leaning back against the couch, her little form encircled by his mother's arm. Mrs. Daubeny glanced at him with a smile, laying her finger on her lips: but the opening of the door roused the child, and perceiving Gerald, she sprang to her feet, wide awake in a moment.

"You have come back," she cried joyfully, running to meet him; and, with his hand upon her shoulder, Gerald approached the couch.

"This is sweet of you, little mother," he said gratefully; and Mrs. Daubeny gave him a look in return, half tender, half quizzical.

"I am not going to approve of your extravagance, Gerald; but I will say your taste is unimpeachable."

"That is indeed a concession," he returned gaily, putting his hand under Winifred's chin, and turning her little face up to his. "What a snow-child it is! When are we going

to get some colour into your cheeks, little one? Been out to-day?"

"Elliot thought she ought to keep quiet. She is hardly up to walking," said Mrs. Daubeny.

"I will take her to see the *Petrel*; it is a glorious evening. Lend me that wrap, mother;" and catching up a red shawl which lay beside the couch, he threw it over Winifred, and lifting her in his arms, walked out of the French window; Grim bounding and barking before him, and the little three-legged terrier dancing behind with as much agility as if a fourth leg were a superfluity with which any well-bred dog could afford to dispense.

"Oh, how lovely!" cried Winifred eagerly, as she looked across the smooth green lawn, where the shadows of the beech-trees lay cool and deep upon the grass, pierced by long golden shafts from the sinking sun, which caught the flowers in the borders till they glowed like jewels in the light. But the child's admiration knew no bounds when Gerald passed through a gate at the bottom of the garden into the wood, and the stream rippled at their feet; while she saw the hills rising on either hand, clad in flowering heath and golden bracken, and the smooth stems of the great beeches rearing their graceful foliage to the clear blue sky.

Except the dusty highroads between town and town, the child knew nothing of country scenery, and her enthusiastic delight surprised and amused her companion.

"You can come down here whenever you like, if you will promise not to get drowned," he said, as they came in sight of the blue sea, framed between the rocks of the bay. "I give you the freedom of my kingdom. No one comes here but the dogs and I."

A few steps further they emerged on the white sand of the shore, where the waves were breaking on the rocks in liquid fire under the round red sun, setting behind the head-

land of the bay. The tide was high, and only a narrow strip of sand lay uncovered by the water. A small boat was drawn up on the shore, and Winifred bent over it curiously as Gerald set her on her feet. Tied to her duties in the caravan, the delights of the seashore were unknown to her, and she had never before been close to a boat.

"That is only the dingey," he said, amused at her interest.
"Look, little one, there is my *Petrel*."

And, moored to a buoy under the shelter of the rocks, which formed at one side of the bay a deep natural basin, floated a neat little cutter-yacht.

"What a pretty boat, and how big it is!" cried Winifred.
"I suppose you can sail in it right across the sea?"

"I suppose I might; but I don't think I should care to try. She is as good a boat as ever sailed, but she is only half-decked. The sails are kept in this hut, and here are the dingey's sculls. If you are not cold, little one, we will row out and see the last of the sun."

Winifred's face shone with delight at the proposal, and she watched Gerald's proceedings with the deepest interest, as he ran the little boat on rollers to the water's edge, shipped the sculls, and taking off his coat, folded it as a cushion at the stern.

"I am not used to ladies' company," he said, with a smile, as he placed the child upon it. "We must coax a cushion out of Elliot another time. Now hold on, little one, and don't be frightened."

With a final shove, he launched the boat and sprang into it from a rock, making it quiver and lurch in a manner alarming to a novice. But there was no fear in Winifred's little face, only breathless excitement and delight as she found herself for the first time afloat. With wondering eyes she looked over the side, where, in the clear water, she could see the rocks and seaweed far below; and Gerald pointed out the

coloured anemones, with their delicate flower-like tentacles, and told her wonderful stories of the monsters of the deep. The dogs had entered the boat, as a matter of course: the terrier, Toodles, sitting bolt upright, like a figure-head, in the bows; while Grim curled himself beside Winifred in the stern, and after a prolonged and searching gaze into her face, laid his shaggy head, with a sigh of contentment, in the child's lap.

"Grim has accepted you," said Gerald, in amusement. "He is a dog of much discernment. You are not afraid of him, child?"

"I like him," said Winifred, stroking the great head; "and I am not afraid of anything, with you."

He looked at her attentively, as he rowed the boat across the calm water of the bay. She made a picture, sitting beside the dog, with the red shawl over her shoulders, the evening sunlight glinting on her brown, uncovered hair, a flush on her cheeks, and a shining light of happiness in her soft brown eyes. For the first time, it struck him that she was very pretty—so pretty, that he wondered how he had failed to observe it before. If only she would not look so grave and wistful. Plunging into amusing anecdotes of his various pets, he succeeded at last in eliciting a laugh, a low musical laugh, which instantly roused in him the desire to hear it again. Perhaps it was partly the novel sense of proprietorship, but the young man did not appear to regret the price he had paid for his "new toy."

"Mother," he said, when he had carried the child home and resigned her to Elliot to be taken to bed in a small room off the stairs,—"mother, have you noticed what a pretty little thing she is?"

"I don't call her pretty at present, Gerald; but her face is very winning, I grant you, and I am afraid it has promise of beauty."

"Afraid?" he repeated, with a laugh. "The more the better, I should say."

"Not in her position. I hope I may be wrong, but I have a strong feeling that it will be the worse for us all if Winifred grows up beautiful."

"Then we will hope she won't," said Gerald lightly, as he turned to leave the room.

He was always quietly amused by his mother's superstitious fancies, but this speech lingered in his memory, and came back upon him with strange significance in the after years.

CHAPTER IV.

Ward or Wife?

WINIFRED was not long in adapting herself to her new surroundings. Her winning ways and thoughtful consideration soon won upon the servants, who were at first naturally inclined to resent the advent of this strange addition to the household. They seemed instinctively to feel the child's refinement, and, to Mrs. Daubeny's surprise, began calling her "Miss Winifred" of their own accord. To Gerald's pets, indoors and out, the little girl at once constituted herself the especial guardian and attendant. She was Mrs. Daubeny's slave, waiting on her hand and foot; but it was for Gerald that her deepest devotion was reserved, and she worshipped him with a passion of loving gratitude that surprised and amused his mother. His lightest word was law to her, while for anyone to utter a syllable that savoured of his disparagement would rouse her in a moment to burning championship and indignation. She was sorely puzzled at first by his laughing words and jests, and Mrs. Daubeny's rallying speeches. Life to her had been so grim and earnest, that she could not understand how the invalid could joke about her helplessness, nor Gerald make fun of the very things he held most dear.

"Have patience," Mrs. Daubeny would say, when her son looked at her in comical dismay at the child's matter-of-fact interpretation of some joke: "Winifred has plenty of fun in her, I can see; it will come out some day."

And indeed as the months rolled on, and her old life faded further and further into the past, Winifred's face lost its timid

shrinking expression, the hollows disappeared from her cheeks, which became tinted with a soft wild-rose bloom, her eyes shrank into due proportion to her other features, and her manner gained something of the joyous brightness of ordinary childhood. She no longer started at every sound, nor looked up with undisguised terror if anyone suddenly called her name; but she was strangely quiet and thoughtful for her age, delighting to roam the lonely cliffs by herself, or to sit dreaming in the beech-woods, or on the rocks by the shore. Her story was kept a secret at Beechhaven, Mrs. Daubeny always speaking of the child as her son's ward; and Gerald had to stand a considerable amount of chaff from his friends on the subject of his new dignity, from the day when he appeared at the Aylsmouth Regatta with Winifred at his side, in the *Petrel*. He was supremely indifferent to their amusement. Bright and sociable, he thoroughly enjoyed such society as fell in his way, from a ball to a tennis-party, a mess dinner with the officers of the regiment stationed at Aylsmouth, or a game of billiards in a neighbouring country-house; but he loved his home, and the little figure that came flying to the door to meet him the moment his horse's hoofs sounded on the gravel became no insignificant factor in the charm of Beechhaven Cottage. He liked to watch her light, graceful movements, and the eager expressive face, which, in spite of his mother's verdict, he considered remarkably pretty. She was such a companionable child, with her quaint, thoughtful speeches. His pets were all very well, but a day's sail had sometimes proved monotonous in the sole company of Grim and Toodles; and as Winifred happily exhibited no symptoms of discomfort in a choppy sea, she was now his unfailing companion.

"What a little bird you are," he said one day, when Winifred had been about a year at Beechhaven, as the child sprang into the bows to disentangle a rope, stepping with

perfect security on the rolling, unprotected deck. "I believe you have a pair of wings tucked away somewhere."

"They used to call me 'Birdie' in the company," she answered; and Gerald saw the wistful look steal into her eyes which always attended any allusion to her past life.

"Then they showed more sense than I should have credited them with. Winifred is quite too dignified for a mite like you; but I am not going to poach on other people's preserves. I wonder how many names you will have to answer to, little elf, while you are my property?"

"Hundreds, I should think," said Winifred, contentedly; "because I shall be your property always, and you have given me two—three already. I like Mignonette the best. Flower-names are so pretty. It is a pity babies have to be christened before they grow up to see what they will be like. I wonder if it was because Miss Graham was so fair that they called her Lilias. She is just like a tall, white garden lily."

A curious expression came into Gerald's face.

"We'll go about," he said abruptly; "mind the jib, little one."

The boat flew round, answering to her helm; and Winifred, to whom the jib-sheets were a most engrossing and solemn charge, entirely forgot the subject of their conversation in the performance of her nautical duties. Not so her companion. Within the last few months a new vicar had come to the village of Dering, whose eldest daughter, a girl of eighteen, had aroused unbounded admiration in the eyes of all unprejudiced people. Gerald alone seemed blind to the spell of her beauty. He declined to be drawn into discussions on the exact shade of Miss Graham's sea-blue eyes; and, so far as was compatible with civility, appeared to ignore the fact of the young lady's existence.

Mrs. Daubeny noticed a change in her son. He was at times moody, abstracted, almost irritable, although he would turn it off the next moment with his usual laugh; but she was far from suspecting the cause until one autumn evening she happened to mention in his presence that Lilius Graham had brought her the violets standing on a table behind her couch. She was bending over to help Winifred with some work a few minutes later, when she saw in a glass on the wall a reflection of Gerald's figure as he deftly extracted two or three violets from the vase, and concealing them in his hand, left the room with an assumed air of carelessness.

Mrs. Daubeny was considerably disturbed by the discovery. She had always vaguely supposed that Gerald would marry some day; but since the boy had passed, at eighteen, through a very frenzy of devotion for a young lady several years older than himself, he had seemed so happy and heart-whole that his mother's fears were completely lulled to rest. She could not bear to see him unhappy, and after mature reflection arrived at the conclusion that Lilius would make a very charming daughter-in-law. Of course she would be enchanted to marry Gerald, if he once began to woo her in earnest; for Mrs. Daubeny's observation told her that Miss Graham was not altogether indifferent to the young man's good looks. Lilius had a little money of her own, and Gerald would be well off in the future, on receiving the promised partnership; while there was always the delightful possibility of his succeeding some day to his uncle's title and entailed estates, Sir Rawdon being, at present, a childless widower. Mrs. Daubeny planned it all, and grew quite excited over her contemplated self-sacrifice. She would give up the best rooms to the young couple, and refrain in every way from playing the part of the typical mother-in-law. The only obstacle in the way was Winifred; and for some days Mrs. Daubeny was busily employed in writing letters about the child. She

was fond of her adopted daughter, but Gerald's happiness was naturally her first consideration.

When her plans were fully matured, she watched for a favourable opportunity of imparting them to the principal person concerned. A good deal would depend, she felt, on the way in which the matter was put before Gerald. On the first night he was dining out, on the second he brought a friend to dine with him; but on the third they were alone, and after dinner, when Gerald had finished his cigar and came into the drawing-room to draw his chair up to the fire, with the remark that it was a bitter night, and he was glad to be at home, Mrs. Daubeny felt that the moment for which she was waiting had arrived.

"Mrs. Graham said she thought there would be a frost, when she and Lilius were here this afternoon," she observed quietly. "What a nice girl Lilius is, Gerald, so bright and sweet-tempered; she would make a charming wife."

"I wish Charlotte would make better fires!" exclaimed Gerald suddenly, going down on his knees before the coal-box. "Who ever saw such a fire for a November night?" and he commenced shovelling on the coals with such energy that Mrs. Daubeny was forced to interpose.

"My dear boy, it is half-past nine; you are making a fire to last the whole night," she remonstrated gently.

Gerald desisted, but he did not resume his seat; and his mother watched him anxiously, as he stood with his back towards her, straight and tall, on the hearthrug, his elbow on the mantelshelf, looking down on the smoky fire.

"Mrs. Graham wants you to help them with the decorations for St. Andrew's Day, next Saturday," she resumed. "I said I thought you could go. You know it is the Dedication Festival."

"I have something else to do on my Saturdays than decorate churches, mother."

"But you used always to help in the Sardons' time," said Mrs. Daubeny quietly, ignoring the young man's tone. "Gerald, why are you so extremely anxious to avoid Liliás Graham?"

"Nonsense, mother! what will you say next? I must go to the smoking-room; I have some letters to write."

"Come here to me, first," said Mrs. Daubeny, quickly. "I can't come to you, you know," she added, in a pathetic tone, which Gerald, who had already reached the door, was quite unable to resist.

"What is it, mother? I wish you would not badger a fellow so!" he exclaimed, irritably, as he moved reluctantly across the room.

"Sit down," said Mrs. Daubeny, peremptorily. "How can I talk to you with your head up in the ceiling?" Then, as Gerald, with a sulky air of resignation, dropped into his usual chair at her side, she laid her thin hand on his arm, and murmured softly: "Dear boy, what an ostrich you are, to think you can hide your secret from your mother."

Gerald flushed to the very roots of his hair, and, but for the detaining hand on his arm, would have sprung again to his feet. He was so confused and taken by surprise, that he suffered Mrs. Daubeny to continue without interruption:

"I know you love Liliás; and you have avoided her because you think you cannot marry. Now, I have been thinking the matter over; and I don't see that it is at all impossible. Liliás has very simple tastes, and I believe she would put up with a good deal for your sake."

"Mother, you must be dreaming!" cried Gerald, finding his voice at last. "I have never said a word to Miss Graham, and she has not given me the slightest reason to suppose that—that—"

"That she would have you," said Mrs. Daubeny, concluding the sentence for him. "Of course not; she is much

too nice a girl to be running after anybody. But I have been watching her, Gerald; and I am sure that you might win her, if you tried."

"Don't, mother," and he raised his hand to his eyes to hide the mingled pain and rapture which possessed him at her words; "it is rough enough as it is without thinking that."

"But why not think it, Gerald? Of course we are poor at present, but you will be better off some day; and, as I said before, Liliás is accustomed to a quiet country life."

"I can't be a partner till Mr. Monro retires, and that may not be for ten years to come. How could I have the face to expect any girl to wait for me all that time?"

"I should not ask her to wait. Marry her, and bring her to the Cottage. We need not alter our ways at all. I promise you to be a pattern mother-in-law; you shall not be plagued by quarrels between your wife and mother."

Gerald flung his arms round Mrs. Daubeny in an ecstasy, and hugged her, couch and all, like an excited bear.

"It is awfully dear of you, little mother," he said, his handsome face aglow with hope and joy, as her words seemed to bring the unattainable within his grasp, and bright, alluring visions flitted before his enchanted eyes. Then suddenly his face fell. "Winifred!" he exclaimed in consternation. "I forgot the child. Mother, it is out of the question; we have neither room nor money for both."

"But I have not forgotten her," and Mrs. Daubeny smiled in conscious triumph. "I have been thinking a good deal about her lately. You know it is all very well for her to do lessons with me; but I cannot teach her like a regular governess, and she is sadly behind other girls of her age. I believe you cannot do justice to her without sending her to school."

"We might make arrangements for her to share the Vicarage children's lessons with their governess," he said

gravely. "I should not think of sending her to school; besides, we could not afford the expense."

"I know that, and I have been making enquiries about the Killingworth School in North London, where they take a certain number of girls free on the foundation. I found your Uncle Rawdon, Lord Carnforth, and General Ellersleigh are all on the committee, so I wrote to them telling Winifred's story, and have received a promise that she shall be admitted free next Midsummer. The children on the foundation are in charge of a matron, wear a uniform, and only have a fortnight's holiday in the year. You see Winifred will therefore be taken entirely off our hands for the present, and receive an education which will make her independent for life. You will probably be a partner by the time she is grown up, so she can come back to us as my companion. I think it is an excellent arrangement."

Mrs. Daubeny spoke fast and nervously; she did not quite like the expression of her son's face.

"You have done all this without consulting me?"

"My dear boy, I was afraid of disappointing you if the plan fell through. Now it is really settled, you can ask Lilia as soon as you like; for you would hardly, in any case, have wanted to marry before next summer. Don't you see," she added eagerly, for Gerald's face was still grave and troubled, "with this arrangement Winifred will not cost you another penny until she is grown up, and it will be the best possible thing for her. She is a dear child, but she is far too dreamy and old-fashioned for her age. It will do her a world of good to mix with other children, instead of living always with you and me; and she really needs school discipline, if she is ever to study to any purpose. She goes off into a dream in the very middle of her lessons."

"For which reason she is not fitted for school," said Gerald decidedly. "Discipline, mother! I should have thought she

had had discipline enough to last her all her life. I am not going to send her to be bullied by vulgar schoolmistresses, and worked to death at exams. A little, shy, sensitive, nervous thing; she would be utterly miserable in a big school."

"But, my dear Gerald, she would soon get used to school-life, and it must be a well-conducted place with all those people we know on the committee. You really make an absurd fuss over the child. It is no kindness to spoil her, you know."

"She never disobeyed me in her life, so I hardly see how I can be spoiling her; and she is a blossom that wants no end of sunshine, or it will never open at all. As to those people, they only lend their names. I don't suppose they go near the school from one year's end to another. I can answer for my uncle, at any rate."

"Well, it is for you to decide," said Mrs. Daubeny, provoked at Gerald's obstinacy; "though I think you might say 'Thank you,' after all the trouble I have taken on your account."

"It is awfully good of you, little mother; and, indeed, I am very much obliged, only ——"

"Only you prefer Winifred to Lilius. Well, I trust the child's company will console you when Lilius marries another man, as of course she will marry if you don't lift a finger to prevent her."

"It is not my preference; it is my duty. Mother, don't tempt me. God knows it is hard enough without that."

He sprang to his feet, and began to pace up and down the room with quick, hurried steps, his hand clenched, and his lips drawn close together.

"Dear boy, you don't think I would persuade you to do wrong," said Mrs. Daubeny, relapsing into her most caressing tone, as she watched him with anxious eyes. "Of course you accepted a certain responsibility when you adopted Winifred;

but it seems to me only common-sense that you fulfil it better by giving her a good education than by letting her run wild at home. The child will thank you some day if she does not realise it now, and I am sure she would be the last to wish to stand in the way of your happiness."

"For which reason I am to buy mine at the expense of hers. Mother, you would never have thought of this plan if it had not been for—for Miss Graham. I never heard you complain of Winifred before. When I took the child away from her father, I vowed to myself to do the best I could by her. You know what an affectionate little thing she is. It would have been cruel to bring her here, and let her get attached to us all, only to break her heart by sending her off to a charity school for an indefinite number of years. I gave her my word she should stay with us always, and I am not going to be cur enough to go back from it for my own convenience. I should expect a curse on my love, and deserve it too."

"And so to these sentimental considerations you will sacrifice Miss Graham's happiness and my wishes? Really, Gerald, this is carrying philanthropy too far."

With a sudden movement, Gerald threw open the window, and stepping into the garden, shut it again behind him. He was wearing only his thin dress-suit, but he felt no consciousness of cold as he crossed the garden, and resting his arms on the fence, stood motionless under the starlight in the clear frosty air. He was worried past endurance by his mother's pertinacity, and the fair entrancing vision which her words summoned before his eyes. He had great faith in Mrs. Daubeny's powers of observation: she had told him that he might win Lilius, and he knew that at present he had no rivals worth the name.

To win Lilius for his wife, what vistas of cloudless happiness that one word conjured up! Lilius in bridal white, with

the orange flowers crowning her sunny hair, and her blue eyes shining on him through the falling veil; or, better still, Liliás in her simple morning-gown moving at his side through the garden, pouring out his coffee for breakfast, and smiling farewell from the gate; the weary drudgery of his daily life hallowed and glorified by the thought that he was toiling for her, and that she would be waiting for him at its close. She was so beautiful, so holy, in his eyes in her stainless truth and innocence, that his very soul went forth to her in passionate worship and love.

"Du bist wie eine Blume so rein, so schon, so gut,"

he murmured to himself as he stood.

Fair and pure, indeed, as a lily, yet no unapproachable Madonna on marble altar, but a merry, light-hearted girl, with a dimple on her rounded cheek, and a laugh clear and sweet as a silver bell. His wife! How he would love and cherish her, forestall her every wish, and make her life, as she would render his, one dream of summer sunshine. His heart beat wildly at the thought. What stood between him and this vision of earthly paradise? Only a small pale face, with wistful eyes, and a promise made to a child who trusted him. He could not share his mother's roseate views of Winifred's future. He knew that under the guise of acting for the little girl's good he would be dooming her to years of misery and mental pain. She was too shy and sensitive to hold her own with rough, noisy children; too thoughtful and dreamy to adapt herself to the mechanical routine of any school—and a charity school! Gerald compressed his lips as there flashed across his memory a remark he had once heard from his father's friend, General Ellersleigh, about the Killingworth School:

"Ah, yes! admirable institution. Turns out first-rate governesses, I am told; only, judging from the death-rate, a

survival of the fittest. Managers declare if the examiners will keep on raising standards, pupils must work up to them, or the school go to pieces. Pity to let it go to pieces, so there is nothing to be said."

"Nothing to be said!" muttered Gerald to himself. "Why, hang it all, I had better have left the child in the caravans than send her to grind like a galley slave. Physical pain is better than mental any day."

And, alone under the cold clear stars, he fought out the hardest battle of his life, and forced himself to renounce the beautiful Hope, fluttering dazzling pinions before his eyes. And Hope folded her wings, and vanished in the night; and Gerald knew that Liliás Graham was lost to him for ever.

CHAPTER V.

A Modern Vanderdecken.

AN hour later, after an interview with his mother, in which he had acquainted her with his resolution, and good-humouredly borne the brunt of the vexation that Mrs. Daubeny could not altogether restrain at the failure of her cherished scheme for her son's happiness, Gerald was mounting the stairs to bed. Feeling for once thoroughly fagged out, he went slowly, resting his hand on the banisters, instead of springing up in his usual fashion, three steps at a time. Passing the door of Winifred's room, which opened on the landing, a curious sound came to his ears, and he paused outside to listen. The sound was repeated, and he thought he could distinguish a stifled sob. Was the child suffering from nightmare? Softly turning the handle, he looked into the room, and saw, to his amazement, Winifred with her face buried in the pillow, and her whole frame shaking with convulsive sobs.

"What is the matter, little one? Are you ill? Shall I call Elliot?" he asked in consternation, advancing to the bedside.

She gave a violent start at the sound of his voice, and, with her usual instinct of concealment, dived under the clothes, leaving nothing visible but the top of her little dark head.

"Nothing is the matter; I am all right," she murmured in a voice so low that, muffled by the bedclothes, he only just caught the words.

"But people don't cry for nothing, Mignonette. Look up, and tell me what has hurt you?"

A sob was the only reply, and Gerald determined to find out the truth. He had never known Winifred cry since the first day she came to Beechhaven.

"Come, child, look up!" he said firmly; and as the little girl, who never dreamed of disobeying Gerald, reluctantly lifted a flushed tear-stained face with her big brown eyes swimming in tears, he added: "Now tell me why you are crying?"

"I can't, I can't! Please don't ask me?" she murmured pitifully.

"But I want to know, so I am afraid you must tell me, little one."

"It was only that I heard Mrs. Daubeny say this afternoon to Mrs. Graham, while Miss Graham was talking to me, that—that you were thinking of sending me to school," said Winifred timidly, choking back her sobs. "It was very silly of me to cry, because you know I am glad to go if you wish it, really glad. You won't think I mind, will you?" And then, as Gerald laid his hand on her head, grief overmastered her attempted heroism, and she buried her face again from sight, shaking from head to foot with the violence of her suppressed sobs.

"Hush, hush, my dear little girl, you must not cry like this; you will make yourself ill. It was all a mistake. I am not going to send you to school," said Gerald quickly.

Winifred looked up as if scarcely able to believe her ears.

"You mean it!" she cried breathlessly, gazing into his face as if her life hung on the answer. "Never at all?"

"Never at all! Didn't I promise you should stay with us always? You might have had more faith in me, Mignonette."

Something in Gerald's smile, and the weary look on his face, struck the child in the midst of her sudden joy.

"I thought school would be different," she said. "Oh,

Gerald, how good you are to me!" and she passionately kissed the hand he had laid on hers. "I wish I could do something for you. Is anything the matter?" she added timidly. "You look so tired."

"I am rather used up," he admitted; "I had a tough bit of work to get through to-night. I must be off to bed; and you, child, have you lain awake all this time?"

"Yes, but I shall go to sleep now"; she answered contentedly.

"Well, good-night, little one. Another time I advise you to apply to head-quarters for information of my intentions. Mignonette," he added in a different tone, as he bent to kiss her, "I wonder if a day will ever come when you will want to leave me?"

"Gerald!" and the child looked up at him with eyes full of hurt reproach. "Oh, you are making fun!" she added, with a little sigh of relief, laying her head on his shoulder, and clinging passionately round his neck. "You know I would rather die than go away from you."

But Gerald was not making fun; and when he had disengaged himself from the eager embrace, and turned to leave the room, life did not seem to him quite so desolate and empty as it had done a few minutes before. It was something to be loved and trusted even by a child, and to carry with him the consciousness that his sacrifice had not been made in vain; for Winifred at least was happy.

And the child seemed to grow happier every day. In his anxiety to avoid Miss Graham, Gerald shunned parties, and spent nearly all his evenings at home that winter, devoting himself energetically to wood-carving, in which occupation, as in all that concerned him, Winifred took a profound and absorbing interest. She ransacked the illustrated books in the house for designs, and persuaded Charlotte to accompany her on long walks to distant village churches in search of

bits of old carving, of which her little fingers would trace out the pattern on paper with wonderful skill and accuracy; and Gerald, surprised at the ability she displayed, began to teach her what he remembered of the drawing he had learned as a boy for Sandhurst. Winifred was enchanted with this new occupation, and passed every available moment in taking portraits of the cat, the dogs, Mrs. Daubeny, and anyone she could persuade to sit for her, showing a wonderful talent for catching a likeness, although the result was naturally not otherwise all that could be desired.

The winter glided into spring, spring was fast merging in summer; and from the numerous admirers which gossip assigned her, Liliás Graham had as yet failed to choose a lover. Mrs. Daubeny's hopes began to revive; perhaps, after all, the young lady would remain free until Gerald was in a position to urge his suit, if only she dared give her a hint of how matters stood; but Liliás seemed smilingly indifferent to Gerald's proceedings, and Mrs. Daubeny dared not breath a word without her son's permission. Was Liliás still heart-whole she wondered, watching the girl as she sat beside her one lovely June afternoon. The invalid's couch had been wheeled under the shadow of a beech tree on the lawn, and the leaves fluttering in the breeze cast fitful gleams of light upon Miss Graham's golden hair, and the winsome beauty of her face. She was wearing a pale-blue cotton gown, which set off the gracious curves of her tall, stately figure, and her broad-brimmed hat lay on the grass, as she leant back in a deck chair, talking lightly and easily to her companion of parish matters and local gossip.

No one expected Liliás to be clever or intellectual; it was quite enough for most people to be within sight of her lovely face, which, if it had a fault, was perhaps slightly lacking in expression. The deep blue eyes looked always the same under their dark-arched brows, the pure milk-and-rose of her

complexion rarely varied in hue, and the smile on the small rosebud mouth was precisely similar, whether evoked by a remark on the weather, or some passionate speech conveying a life's love and devotion under the thin guise of a compliment. She formed an exquisite picture, framed by the smooth dun stem and fresh green leaves of the beech; and Mrs. Daubeny secretly wished that Gerald could be there to see it. She had invited Lilius to remain to tea, but she knew that she would leave before the young man was due to return. From the beech-wood came the merry voices of children and Grim's joyous barking; Miss Graham's small brother and sister having accompanied her to the Cottage, and beguiled Winifred into a game of hide-and-seek.

"How excited those children are," observed Lilius placidly. "It always amuses me to see Winifred play; she so evidently does it for the others' pleasure, and not her own. You might think she was their mother, and yet she is a year younger than Nellie, and only a few months older than Ernest."

"We live in deeds, not years," quoted Mrs. Daubeny, with something like a sigh, "and Winifred has lived always with grown-up people. I want to send her to school, but Gerald thinks her too shy and nervous at present."

"Yes, indeed, she is as timid as a hare," said Miss Graham decidedly. "I should not send her yet awhile, Mrs. Daubeny; and you would miss her, would you not?"

"I should at first; but I hope Gerald may marry some day, and then ——"

Mrs. Daubeny stopped abruptly, for a dark shadow fell on the patch of sunlit grass between her and Miss Graham, and a masculine voice, with a deep, curious, intonation like a muffled bell, said quietly:

"A thousand apologies for interrupting this charming *tête-à-tête*; but I was not aware that you had visitors,

Eleanor, and I told the servant I would announce myself. Pray forgive my indiscretion."

The speaker had advanced unheard over the lawn behind the two ladies, and now stood confronting Mrs. Daubeny—a tall, fine-looking man, with a singularly handsome face, and calm, self-reliant bearing.

"Dear me, Rawdon, what a delightful surprise!" said Mrs. Daubeny quickly, although a keen observer might have detected a want of cordiality in her tone. "I had no notion you were in England. Liliias, let me introduce my brother-in-law. Sir Rawdon Daubeny—Miss Graham."

The young lady bowed with her usual air of peaceful serenity, glancing through her long lashes at the new comer as he drew up a chair beside the couch immediately facing her own. She was surprised not to see an older-looking man; for Sir Rawdon, although on the verge of fifty, appeared still in the prime of life. The short-pointed beard and moustache, which covered mouth and chin, were black as a raven's wing; there were few lines on the broad, intellectual forehead, and in the interest of conversation the dark, sombre eyes would light up with all the fire and energy of youth. It was a melancholy face when in repose, Liliias thought, struck by the curious pallor of the clear olive skin and the wearied look in the deep unfathomable eyes—a face which might have belonged to Vanderdecken or the Wandering Jew; to any man doomed under a curse which shut out all hope and brightness from his life. With an involuntary shudder she slightly moved her position, turning towards Mrs. Daubeny; but as if drawn by an irresistible fascination, her gaze, veiled by her drooping lashes, again strayed towards her *vis-à-vis*, their eyes met, and a thrill like an electric shock ran through the girl's frame.

"I will go and look after the children, Mrs. Daubeny," she said, rising. "I have no doubt they are in some mischief."

Sir Rawdon rose also, moving his chair for the young lady to pass, and stood looking after her for a moment, as she crossed the lawn with her usual slow graceful step, which was admirably suited to her tall stately figure.

"You have some charming neighbours, Eleanor," he observed, reseating himself, with a smile. "Who is that young lady, may I ask?"

"The daughter of our new vicar at Dering. They have been here almost a year."

"Did you say the name was Graham? I was at Oxford with a Theodore Graham—a thoroughly good fellow. I wonder if it is the same? I remember he was going to take orders."

"Mr. Graham's name is Theodore," said Mrs. Daubeny, with a coldness which Sir Rawdon did not seem to observe.

"Then no doubt it is the same. I must look him up. And so that girl is his daughter. It does make one feel a Methuselah to find one's contemporaries with grown-up families; though if it were not for Gerald's existence, Eleanor, I could go back more than twenty years when I am with you. You don't look a day older than when I knew you first."

"I think I can return the compliment, Rawdon," replied Mrs. Daubeny with a mollified smile. "At any rate, you are not the least altered since you came here last, which I believe was four years ago."

"So long as that? Time flies, and I have been knocking about the world as usual. I have just returned from shooting big game in Africa, and have brought you a few skins, and some outlandish weapons which I thought Gerald might fancy. I went to the bank to see him this morning; he is looking very well, but I am sorry to hear old Monro has not yet seen fit to clear out of his way."

"I am afraid he will not retire for a good while to come," and Mrs. Daubeny sighed. "Of course, Rawdon," she went

on, "you have brought your luggage, and are going to stay with us this time?"

"Thank you—no. Gerald asked me also, but I have business in Aylsmouth, and shall sleep on my yacht which is in the harbour. I daresay I may be kept there several days, so I shall be very glad to come over and see you again if you will allow me."

"I suppose you doubt the capacities of our cook," said Mrs. Daubeny drily; "although I remember it was the same thing in the Aldershot days. Have you turned Mussulman, Rawdon, and vowed to eat no meat but of your own killing? I should think it must be ten years and more since you descended to pass a night under our roof."

A curious gleam lurked for a moment in Sir Rawdon's deep-set eyes, but he replied with a careless smile:

"I fear I have grown a frightful bear; but the fact is, my Bohemian life has spoilt me for civilisation. I am a bad sleeper, and like to be free to turn out at any moment in the night without fear of disturbing other people's households by fumbling over unknown bolts."

"You might have Gerald's latch-key, if that is all."

"Thanks, you are very good, but I fear my business will detain me in Aylsmouth for the present, though I should like to put up here,—what a pretty little place it is!" and Sir Rawdon's gaze strayed admiringly over the long, low house with its tiled roof and rose-clad walls. "There is the tea," he added, seeing Charlotte approach with the tray. "Shall I go and look up Miss Graham?"

"You need not; she is coming," said Mrs. Daubeny, as her quick eye caught sight of a little group emerging from the wood—Lilias, with a child clinging to each arm, while the boy raced on in front with Grim.

Sir Rawdon glanced at the approaching figures, and then with ready courtesy, which seemed the only family trait he

possessed in common with his nephew, turned to assist Charlotte, who seemed to be in difficulties with the leaves of the tea table. When he raised his head, the three girls were not many yards away, and as his gaze fell on the trio, a singular change passed over the baronet's face. His eyes grew fixed and stony, his nostrils dilated, his brows knit together, and his hands clenched with rigid grip upon the back of a chair. Thus he stood motionless for a moment, when, recovering his composure by a determined effort, he bent forward inquiring in a low tone of Mrs. Daubeny, who had failed to observe his emotion :

"That child on Miss Graham's left, is she her sister ? There is no resemblance."

"No ; that is Winifred Flowers, Gerald's *protégée*. You remember I wrote to you about her last year for the Killing-worth School."

"Winifred Flowers—ah ! yes, of course," said Sir Rawdon slowly, pressing his hand to his brow. "Not a bad-looking little thing ;" and, with a smile which did not seem quite natural, he went forward to meet Liliias and the children.

"I was coming in search of you, Miss Graham. Is this your sister ?" and he offered his hand to Nellie, who, proud of the attention, gave him a glance, half-shy, half-saucy, from her bright blue eyes as she took it. With an amused smile Sir Rawdon was turning toward Winifred, when the little girl suddenly drew back, and slipping away, ran to take her usual place behind the tea-table. "So you will not speak to me ?" he said calmly, looking full at the little figure with the same quiet smile upon his face.

"Winifred, I am ashamed of you," exclaimed Mrs. Daubeny in a scandalised tone. "Go and say, 'How do you do, Sir Rawdon ?' this moment."

For the first time Winifred hesitated to obey ; shrinking back, she threw an imploring glance at the couch, but per-

ceiving from Mrs. Daubeny's expression that there was no escape from fulfilling her mandate, she approached the visitor with faltering steps and downcast eyes.

"I am sorry I am such a formidable person," said Sir Rawdon lightly, as he touched the little hand, which trembled strangely in his clasp. "I always pity shy children," he went on, turning to Miss Graham, "though I cannot remember ever experiencing the sensation myself. Is this your brother?" as the boy, who had been careering round the lawn with Grim, ran up breathless. "I should have known him anywhere for Theodore Graham's son," and he proceeded to explain to Lilius that he was an old acquaintance of her father's.

"You could not have been at college with dad," said the young gentleman incredulously, standing before Sir Rawdon's chair. "Why his hair is quite grey, and you—you don't look old at all."

"Ernie dear, that is rude," interrupted his sister quickly.

"On the contrary, it is a compliment, Miss Graham; but look here, my boy, what do say to this?" and removing his hat, Sir Rawdon quietly pointed to a single snow-white lock plainly conspicuous amongst the black hair just above his right temple.

"It looks as if somebody had caught it and squeezed the colour out," responded Master Ernest, surveying the phenomenon with deep interest. "I say," he added in a lower tone, fixing a pair of eager brown eyes on the baronet's face, "it wasn't the devil, was it?"

"Ernest!" cried Miss Graham in a shocked voice, while Sir Rawdon laughed outright.

"Well, he pinched Luther's nose—at least, Luther pinched his. No, that was St. Dunstan. It was Luther threw the ink-bottle at him, and left the stain on the wall."

"Hush, Ernest; you must not talk so much," said Lilius, eager to cut short these doubtful reminiscences of church

history. "Go and help Winifred to hand the cups. Pray excuse him, Sir Rawdon," she added as the boy obeyed.

"Never mind, Miss Graham, I brought it on myself," returned the baronet, in evident amusement. "Ernest does remind me of his father,—just his downright way of going at his point;" and rising quickly, he anticipated the children in supplying Mrs. Daubeny and Liliias with tea and bread-and-butter.

"You were chaffing, now weren't you?" demanded Ernest the irrepressible, returning presently with a huge lump of cake to seat himself on the grass at Sir Rawdon's feet. "You are not really as old as dad?"

"Not much short, young man; but, you see, I have had no boys and girls to bring premature grey hair and wrinkles. It is an enviable lot, isn't it?" Sir Rawdon went on in a curiously bitter tone. "To be able to come and go, sleep and wake, without consulting anyone's wishes but one's own. To have no one to grieve for one's absence, or to welcome one's return. It is a great thing to be free and independent; and if a man should have the bad taste to find life lonely, *tant pis pour lui*;" and with an almost imperceptible shrug of his shoulders, he rose to take Miss Graham's cup.

"Some more tea, please," said Liliias. "You should come and see papa, Sir Rawdon," she went on, with a smile. "He is always complaining that he does not know what to do with the five of us,—we have two more brothers at school,—and that we give him no peace of his life."

Her tone was light, but Sir Rawdon thought he detected a look of sympathy in the bright blue eyes.

"I hope to look him up, Miss Graham. I wonder if we shall recognise each other? The clearest picture I carry of him in my mind's eye is dancing a hornpipe before a huge bonfire, lighted in defiance of the dons in the college quad to celebrate our boat having gained the head of the river."

"No! did he really?" exclaimed Ernest eagerly. "Oh, Sir Rawdon, do tell us about it! Dad dancing a hornpipe! I should like to see him at it."

"My dear Rawdon," murmured Mrs. Daubeny in an ex-postulatory tone, dreading what further revelations might be in store concerning the dignified vicar; but there was a twinkle in her eyes as she spoke, and Sir Rawdon, who appeared to have completely changed his mood, kept the whole group amused and laughing at one lively story after another, until Lilius began to think her first impression had been entirely false, and that the uncanny-looking baronet was a most interesting and entertaining companion.

Only one person seemed to hold herself aloof from the sphere of his influence, and ensconced behind the tea-urn, no one noticed that Winifred was not even listening to the stories, as she sat in a sort of dream, her great brown eyes fixed with curious apprehension on Sir Rawdon's face. The conversation, at last, went slightly over the children's heads, and catching sight of Tomlins in the distance, Nellie and Ernest ran off to petition the old man to show them a young calf in which they took a lively interest. Lilius, who had brought some fancywork in her pocket, took a seat beside Mrs. Daubeny to consult over the intricacies of a new stitch; and Sir Rawdon, with a glance towards Winifred, remarked that he would very much like to see Gerald's boat, and feared he must leave before the young man came home.

"Winifred will show it you; she always goes out with him," said Mrs. Daubeny, looking up from the work, when, to her annoyance, the child again hung back, turning on her a frightened, beseeching gaze.

Her reluctance was so marked that Sir Rawdon could not fail to observe it.

"I am not the wolf if you are Red Riding Hood," he said with a smiling glance at the scarlet hood which, in deference

to a whim of Gerald's, Winifred wore over her dark hair, straw-hats being apt to go overboard in the *Petrel*. "I promise not to eat you in the wood."

"I think Winifred has taken leave of her senses," said Mrs. Daubeny coldly. "If there is one thing I cannot endure, it is *gaucherie* under the plea of shyness. Tell Sir Rawdon at once you are very pleased to go with him."

"Rather a large order," laughed Sir Rawdon, with a quick glance at the little flushed face and imploring eyes turned on Mrs. Daubeny. "Never mind, I daresay I can find the *Petrel* by myself."

"I will show you the way," said Winifred, hastily stepping forward in dread lest Mrs. Daubeny should issue a repetition of her command which went sorely against the child's conscience, and, with Sir Rawdon at her side, she moved across the lawn towards the beechwood.

CHAPTER VI.

Little Red Riding Hood.

“**W**HAT bell is that?” asked Sir Rawdon, suddenly breaking the silence, as he and his little companion reached the gate into the wood.

“I don’t hear any bell,” said Winifred shyly.

“Ah! but I do. It is a church-bell tolling, and it comes from there,” waving his hand in the direction of the lane.

“It must be at Dering; I heard Miss Graham say old Rogers was dead: but you have wonderful ears, Sir Rawdon;” and, startled out of her timidity, Winifred looked up in surprise. “We only hear the Dering bells with a north-east wind when the whole peal is ringing.”

“And the wind is south to-day. Yes, I have the ears of a wolfhound—a doubtful privilege, since there are more harsh sounds than sweet ones in the world. You had better not make any remarks in my presence you do not wish me to hear, Miss Winifred, but I should think you were not given to indulging in unguarded speeches. I heard of you before I saw you, *apropos* of the Killingworth School.”

“Gerald says I am not to go,” she murmured shyly.

“Gerald is credited with spoiling you, I hear. Did he not play knight-errant and carry you off from a caravan?”

Sir Rawdon’s sarcastic tone roused Winifred in a moment to hot indignation.

“He saved my life,” she cried, turning on her companion like an insulted robin, with red cheeks and flashing eyes. “There was not another man who dared to interfere with

father, and Gerald fought him and beat him, and made him do whatever he told him."

"And like a tourney prize you were transferred to the winner. Did your father make no protest at your abduction?"

"Gerald paid him," said Winifred with glowing face. "Mrs. Daubeny has told me since, Gerald gave him £50, the money he had saved for his holiday, and so he did not go away at all that year."

"Quixotism indeed! And you were glad to leave your own friends and go away with a stranger?"

"Gerald was not a stranger," said Winifred with decision, "and father would have killed me if I had stayed."

"And your mother?"

"Mother was dead," said Winifred softly.

"I suppose you were like your mother?—in appearance I mean."

"No," said Winifred in surprise. "Mother was so fair and pretty: her hair was just like golden silk, and she had blue eyes—almost as blue as Miss Graham's."

"And you were her only child? Then I suppose you are like your father?"

"I don't think so." An expression of distress crossed Winifred's face at the idea. "He always looked cross, and showed his teeth;"—and with a little shiver she turned away, thankful that the shore was reached, and she had the excuse of breaking off to point out the *Petrel* to her companion.

The tide was low, and the tiny waves sparkling in the sunlight slid almost imperceptibly over the white sand, while, motionless as a painted ship, on the emerald pool under the shadow of the precipitous rocks lay the little yacht, reflected line for line in the clear still water.

"It is a pretty boat," remarked Sir Rawdon with an in-

difference which seemed curious towards the ostensible object of his walk. "I wonder how you would like my yacht, Winifred? She has three masts, and has taken me all round the world. Would you like to come over to Aylsmouth and see her?"

"No, thank you," answered Winifred promptly. "I know I should not like her as much as the *Petrel*." Then fearing she had made a rude speech, she added, apologetically: "You see, I am used to the *Petrel*, and we can sail her by ourselves. Of course I should not like a new boat so well, but I daresay yours is very nice. What is her name?"

"The *Silence*," said Sir Rawdon in a tone which made the child glance at him curiously.

He was standing with dreamy eyes looking out over the sunny bay to the far horizon, and something of the sadness, the intense sorrowful yearning of his expression touched Winifred's warm heart. She saw his thoughts were far away from her—she forgot the nameless terror with which he had inspired her, only remembering she had heard him say that he was alone in the world.

"You have Gerald," she said softly, following her own train of thought; "he is your nephew, and he is fond of you, isn't he?"

Sir Rawdon started; he guessed what the child meant, but he did not choose to show he understood.

"You think that Gerald is sufficient substitute for yourself?"

"Of course he is, but I did not mean that at all. It was very good of you to ask me, and if you like I will ask Gerald to take me; but of course it cannot make any difference to you what a little girl like me may say. I was thinking of what you said on the lawn. You cannot be quite lonely with Mrs. Daubeny and Gerald."

"*Sancta Simplicitas!*" Sir Rawdon smiled and then sighed.

"So you pity me, child. I wonder if you will do something for me?"

"If I can," murmured Winifred, shrinking into herself under the peculiar look turned upon her by those deep dark eyes.

"I think you can;" and Sir Rawdon smiled as he took a pencil and note-book from his pocket, opened on a blank page, and put them into the child's hand. "Sit down here"—he pointed to a low rock on the shore,—“and draw me your father's face from memory.”

Winifred's terror woke again to life. She looked up with a start.

"How did you know I could draw?" she asked fearfully. "Did Gerald tell you?"

"No one told me. I know most things by instinct, and you have artist's fingers. Will you do it for me? It may be useful to Gerald in future days that I should know the man."

Gerald's name was enough for Winifred, and though far from satisfied with the explanation, she complied on the instant, trying to still her nervous apprehension at finding herself alone with a man who seemed, in her bewilderment, the possessor of supernatural powers. Nearly two years had passed since the September evening when, hand in hand with Gerald, she had left her father's theatre; but every feature of Flowers' coarse countenance was imprinted indelibly on her memory, and as the outline grew beneath her fingers she experienced a fearful fascination in the task. In silence Sir Rawdon watched the little figure, in its grey frock, bending over the paper, the red hood pushed back from the soft dark hair, the cheeks flushed, the lips pressed together, and an intent absorbed look in the great brown eyes. It was not easy to read his expression, but pain seemed to predominate in the gaze with which he followed every stroke of Winifred's

pencil; and when she raised her hand on the accomplishment of her task, he started, like a man awakening from a dream. Without speaking, he gazed intently at the sketch which Winifred timidly offered him; for she was dissatisfied with her performance, little suspecting it was the best she had ever done. Thoroughly possessed with her subject—the coarse repulsive face, with its ferocious scowl and prominent teeth, seemed to stand out with life-like gaze from the paper.

"I see I was not mistaken," said Sir Rawdon quietly, as he closed the book and put it in his pocket. "You will have pictures in the *Salon* some day, Winifred. Your style will be too free and realistic for namby-pamby English sentimentality. Ah! with your high-strung nature, you little know your good fortune in possessing the gift of expression."

Winifred answered only by a glance of intense bewilderment as they turned to retrace their steps through the wood. She scarcely understood one syllable of this strange address.

"The most terrible fate for a human being," went on Sir Rawdon, evidently speaking more to himself than the child, "is to be intensely sensitive to horror; to brood over scenes witnessed or imagined—for the latter are often more real than the former—until the brain is sick and dizzy, and yet can find out no relief that is more than temporary. People call Wiertz the mad painter. Folly! As if any man could be mad who is able to give expression, and therefore relief, to his thoughts."

"Gerald told me about Wiertz," said Winifred, chilled by Sir Rawdon's singular tone and manner, and delighted to catch at something tangible. "He went to see his pictures last year in Brussels, and said they nearly gave him nightmare. He will never go again."

Sir Rawdon's lips curled.

"Exactly what I should have expected. There is a good deal of the Philistine in Gerald. Did he tell you, Winifred, that Wiertz is the greatest painter of our century; that he lived solely for art, and, though a poor man, refused to sell his pictures because he dreamed of perfection, and would have them grow with his growth, and never quit his hands until the brush dropped from his fingers in death; that, although he has painted the greatest horrors, he has also created the loveliest visions ever seen on canvas—a fact which people generally find it convenient to ignore? Did he tell you this?"

"He brought me a photograph of the 'Triumph of Christ,'" she answered. "It must be a wonderful picture, only—perhaps it was the fault of the photograph, but the figure of Satan looks to me so much more beautiful than Christ."

A curious smile flickered over Sir Rawdon's face.

"And your moral sense revolts—eh, Winifred? Remember the Garden of Eden. From the earliest records of our race forbidden fruit has always seemed the fairest. Wiertz is true to nature in that as in every touch inspired by his marvellous brain."

"I don't think so," returned Winifred with decision, her clear child-mind cutting through the web of her companion's sophistry. "A thing has to be perfect to be quite beautiful; and if it is perfect, it can't be bad. When a bad thing is beautiful, it always gives you an uncomfortable feeling, and you know it is only beautiful outside, like the colour on a rotten pear, and will not last."

"Upon my word," and Sir Rawdon glanced in surprised amusement at the child, "what a little metaphysician you are! Pray, what is your definition of bad and good? The words have a different meaning in every country in the world. To kill his enemy is a man's first duty in Corsica; it is a crime in England."

Winifred was puzzled for the moment. She looked away from her questioner into the green aisles of the wood, where the birds were singing, the butterflies dancing, and the sunbeams, striking through the beech-leaves, played hide-and-seek amongst the fern.

"I think badness is selfishness and cruelty," she said at last with an effort, "and goodness is doing to other people what you would like them to do to you; but, please, Sir Rawdon, I can't talk about these things. I only know how they seem to me."

"You are an odd child," he said, and walked on in silence until the garden was reached.

In the meantime the two ladies on the lawn had been discussing the absent man; Liliás having remarked, with a smile, that she was not surprised at Winifred's shyness, for Sir Rawdon was certainly an awe-inspiring person.

"He has never got over his wife's death," returned Mrs. Daubeny. "It was a strange thing; for he was past forty, and everyone thought him a confirmed old bachelor, when he took it into his head to propose to a very pretty girl, Flora Bevil, the daughter of a neighbour of his at Lynscombe Towers. They were married, and went to Scotland for their honeymoon, to a house which Rawdon had recently taken on the west coast. On their return, they stayed a night with Flora's uncle, Lord Vardon, at Glendurgh Castle, and there a terrible thing happened. As a child, Flora had walked in her sleep, but she was supposed to have entirely outgrown the habit. That night, however, she got up without waking Rawdon, went to the window, and threw herself out. There was a steep fall of rock below the castle, and she was killed on the spot. Rawdon woke in the early morning, missed her, and roused the household to search. They say he was nearly frantic with grief when the truth was discovered, and he has never been the same man since."

"How dreadful! No wonder he looks so sad," said Lilius thoughtfully.

"Well, it was nine or ten years ago now; but he is a frightfully excitable man. He is partly Irish, you know. His mother was one of the O'Connors of Clodare, a desperately wild family. Such stories as I have heard about them, enough to turn one's hair grey. They all came to a bad end. It really was a mercy she died at Rawdon's birth, or there is no knowing what might have happened."

"Then, Colonel Daubeny was Sir Rawdon's step-brother?"

"Yes; my husband was the son of a second wife. The Byronic temperament is happily not an inheritance of the Daubeny blood. I should be sorry to see my son take after his uncle."

Lilius made no reply; but she looked with increased attention at Sir Rawdon on his return. She thought she understood now the reason of his bitter comparison between his loneliness and her father's young family.

When, a few minutes later, she rose to take leave, Sir Rawdon begged for permission to escort her home, that he might learn the position of the Vicarage, where he announced his intention of calling on the following day. A little procession, therefore, started along the lane, the children and dogs running on in front, Sir Rawdon walking beside Lilius, and the hired carriage, which had brought him from Aylsmouth, following at a foot's pace in the rear. Winifred accompanied them for about a quarter of a mile, and then stationed herself by a gate, with the dogs at her feet, to wait for Gerald, who generally emerged at this point from a cut across the fields. She had to wait some time before the thud of horse's hoofs came over the grass; and putting his mare at a gap in the hedge, Gerald dropped into the lane.

"Hullo! there you are, little one. Want a ride?"

He let fall the reins, holding out his hands, and in an instant Winifred was swung up before him, while the mare, evidently accustomed to the performance, paced soberly on under her double burden.

"Oh, Gerald, it is so nice to be with you!" and Winifred heaved a sigh of intense relief as she felt the strong arm round her, and looked up into the young man's bright, handsome face.

"What's up now, Mignonette? Anyone been bullying you?"

"No; I have been naughty, and made Mrs. Daubeny very angry," said Winifred dolefully. "I did not mean to be rude, but I was; he frightened me so—Sir Rawdon, I mean."

"So he has been here. Well, I should not have thought him such a formidable person. Was it his height, or his beard? What did he do to you, little one?"

"He—he looked at me," said Winifred; and as Gerald burst into a merry laugh, she hung her head abashed, and went on hurriedly: "I know it was silly, but he reminded me of father."

Gerald laughed still more.

"Red Riding Hood, are you dreaming? Uncle Rawdon is considered one of the handsomest men in England, and an uglier brute than that father of yours one need not wish to see."

"It was the way he looked at me," said Winifred, "and he knew that I could draw; and he heard the bell tolling at Dering, though the wind is the other way."

Gerald demanded an explanation of these singular charges, and seemed puzzled on hearing of Sir Rawdon's request for Flowers' portrait.

"What earthly business is it of his? Perhaps he knows something about the man. Never mind, I will find out all

about it, little one. Now come and make your peace with the mother."

Mrs. Daubeny was seriously displeased; and in spite of Gerald's interposition, scolded Winifred sharply for her behaviour, while the child felt that even Gerald considered her weakly foolish and fanciful. For the first time since her arrival at Beechhaven she cried herself to sleep that night, and her dreams were of scenes of terror, in which she fell helplessly into the power of a threatening figure—that was now Sir Rawdon, now her father, while Gerald, with averted face, stood by as if unconscious of her need.

CHAPTER VII.

The Wooing O't.



SIR RAWDON'S call at Dering Vicarage was duly paid the following afternoon, and, perhaps not entirely to his disappointment, he found Lilius alone, Mrs. Graham being engaged with a mothers' meeting, while the vicar had trudged off on a two-mile tramp in obedience to a summons from a sick parishioner. Mr. Graham had left a message hoping Sir Rawdon would await his return; and the baronet, apparently nothing loth, accepted an easy-chair beside Lilius in the verandah, and made such good use of his time that the girl looked up with an exclamation of surprise on the arrival of the tea-tray simultaneously with her father's return.

Mr. Graham, portly and grey-haired, with a bluff hearty manner, was a curious contrast to his visitor; but the two men seemed to enjoy recalling old associations, and many laughs were provoked by reminiscences of college escapades. Before Sir Rawdon left he had persuaded the vicar to lunch with him the next day on board the yacht, bringing his whole family, Mrs. Graham, a good-tempered, comely matron, only excusing herself on the plea of parish engagements which she could not break.

Having prolonged his visit to an almost unconscionable length, Sir Rawdon at last departed, and drove round by Beechhaven Cottage, where he presented himself with so bright a face that Mrs. Daubeny looked at him in surprise, to invite Winifred to join the vicar's party the next day, Mr. Graham having offered her a seat in his waggonette. Mrs. Daubeny accepted at once for the child, and Winifred,

fervently hoping that Gerald would also be there, conquered her shyness, and made a pretty little speech of thanks. Gerald, however, who arrived soon afterwards, shortly declared it was impossible he could quit the bank; and Sir Rawdon, while politely expressing his regret, did not appear to take his nephew's refusal very much to heart.

Winifred almost forgot her fear of the baronet on the following day; he was so bright, so boyishly happy and light-hearted, and seemed so delighted with his visitors' admiration of his perfectly-appointed yacht, and the fantastic collection of rarities, from all parts of the world, with which it was adorned. The *Silence* was far from deserving her name that afternoon, as the three children raced about, exploring every nook and corner of the yacht, followed by the vicar, partly to satisfy his own curiosity, partly to see that no mischief was wrought by Master Ernest's idle hands; while Lilius sat under an awning on the deck with Sir Rawdon talking eagerly by her side. Late in the afternoon a breeze sprang up; and when the vicar spoke of departure, Sir Rawdon suggested setting sail, and landing the party at Beechhaven, to save them from the dusty drive.

"Why not dine with me, and return by moonlight?" he said, with a pathetic glance at Lilius. "You can't think how tired I get of sitting down evening after evening by myself;" and the faint-hearted opposition from the vicar having been overruled by eager pleading from Nellie and Ernest, the coachman was despatched home with a message to Mrs. Graham not to expect the party before ten o'clock.

The sails were hoisted, and the *Silence*, under a cloud of canvas, passed the harbour mouth, and stood straight out over the blue waves, sparkling in the sunlight, their crests just ruffled by the gentle breeze. The dinner, while the yacht lay to, was a great success, Sir Rawdon possessing an excellent steward, who surpassed himself on the occasion, while

the return on deck to watch the full-moon rising from the sea was Fairyland, the children said. Fearing Lilius would be cold, Sir Rawdon produced a gorgeous mantle, embroidered with jewels and beetles' wings, once the property of an Indian rajah, in which he wrapped her, and sat watching her beautiful face and the shimmer of the jewels in the moonlight, as if unable to withdraw his eyes from the sight. The vicar had the consideration to fall asleep; Nellie and Ernest returned to the saloon in a persevering attempt to solve the mysteries of an Indian puzzle, and Winifred stole away to gaze over the side at the moonlit water, or up at the tall masts of the yacht tapering to the stars, and dream over her favourite fairy tale of the little mermaid who loved the mortal prince. Once or twice, however, she glanced at the pair on deck—Lilius looking like a queen in her regal mantle, and Sir Rawdon's handsome face bending towards her, undisguised admiration in his dark earnest eyes. Winifred had been too thoroughly drilled in stage love-making to be altogether blind to the symptoms in real life; but with natural delicacy she kept her suspicions to herself, feeling it was not a matter to discuss with Mrs. Daubeny or even Gerald.

Two days passed, and Sir Rawdon failed to appear at either Vicarage or Cottage. Gerald heard that the yacht had not returned to Aylsmouth, and the baronet seemed to have departed as abruptly as he came. On the third day, late in the afternoon, Lilius walked over to Beechhaven, to bring some early strawberries which her father had sent to Mrs. Daubeny, and was met at the door by Winifred with the intelligence that Mrs. Daubeny had gone to her room with a bad headache.

"But you will come in and rest, and have some tea, won't you?" said the little girl anxiously; and as it was a very hot afternoon, Lilius complied.

Winifred was enchanted; she had a passionate admira-

tion for Miss Graham's beauty, and to have her all to herself was a matter for intense pride and delight. When tea was over she tried to persuade her visitor to accompany her to the bay. Lilius was always fond of the sea; but she hesitated, glancing at the sky.

"I think I ought to start home, Winifred; I believe there is going to be a storm."

"But it has looked like this the whole afternoon. I am sure it will not come up yet," exclaimed Winifred, coaxingly; and Lilius, always good-natured, suffered herself to be led by the child's eager wish.

The rays of the sun were obscured in watery mist, huge masses of vapour lay piled on the horizon; and as they strolled through the beech-wood, the leaves hung limp and motionless, no faintest breath stirring the close hot atmosphere.

"There will be some air on the shore; there always is," said Winifred: but the bay proved almost as stifling as the wood, the waves creeping in dull and sluggish under the leaden sky, as if they too shared in the general sense of lassitude and depression. The dogs lay panting with their red tongues lolling out of their mouths, apparently too low-spirited even to hunt for crabs under the stones; and Lilius flung herself down as if exhausted on a rock, extemporising a fan out of a piece of driftwood.

"Would you mind staying where you are for ten minutes?" asked Winifred eagerly, pulling out a sketch-book from her pocket, with which she had provided herself in the hope that some such opportunity might occur.

"All right; I am much too tired to move for twice ten minutes. What amazing energy you have, child! Don't you feel the heat at all?"

"Not when I want to draw," answered Winifred, circling round her victim, with intent eyes and knitted brows, to

select the most suitable aspect for the sketch. Having finally decided to include Grim at Miss Graham's feet, and the boat-house for a background, she perched herself on the edge of a rock a few yards away.

"Are you not rather near the water?" suggested Lilius lazily. "The tide can't have turned yet."

"It only just surrounds my rock," said Winifred. "I can wait till it has gone down again. This is much the best position for a sketch."

She set busily to work, too much absorbed in her task to utter a word; while Lilius, giving her thoughts free rein, lived over again that moonlight evening on the yacht, and the walk home which had followed it through the dewy lanes, Sir Rawdon having only bidden the party good-night at the Vicarage door. The sketch was growing rapidly under the little fingers when a sudden rattling sound, followed by a growl from Grim, made Winifred turn her head towards the bay. She started, and lifted her hand to shade her eyes. It was no delusion: there, close under the rocks, with her snowy canvas showing livid against the inky sky, lay the *Silence*; and as Winifred looked, a boat shot from the side, and swiftly approached the shore. She glanced at Lilius, but the young lady had evidently heard nothing; and an intervening rock hid yacht and boat from her sight. In the stern of the latter, Winifred could now distinguish Sir Rawdon's figure; and moved by the instinct of fear which always assailed her at his approach, she closed her sketch-book, and slipped down the rock on the further side, intending to make her escape into the wood. To her dismay, a channel of water separated her from the shore. It was too wide to jump, and Winifred proceeded dejectedly to climb up the rock again, and show herself at the top. She heard the splash of oars, the grating of the keel on the rocky bottom, and Sir Rawdon's voice, in unusual agitation, exclaim:

"Miss Graham, this is an unexpected pleasure! I was coming to say good-bye."

"You are going away?"

There was a startled ring in the girl's tone; and as Winifred's head rose above the rocks, she saw Lilius looking strangely pale, with her blue eyes fixed on Sir Rawdon's face, while he held her hand, which he seemed to have forgotten to release. The boat had already pushed off to return to the yacht, and the two on the shore seemed so engrossed with each other that Winifred hesitated to make known her presence.

"I am obliged to go," said Sir Rawdon hurriedly; "but, Miss Graham, as fate has thrown us together, I should like to tell you something about myself, if you will not think me too egotistic. May I?"

"Tell me anything you please," was the reply, in a somewhat faltering voice.

He led her back to the seat from which she had started on his appearance, and stood before her, his tall figure sharply defined against the lurid sky.

"I hardly know how to make myself intelligible," he said. "In old days, when astrology ranked almost on a par with religion, for a man to acknowledge himself born under a malignant star, was to be regarded by the world as an unlucky beggar, pursued by misfortune through no fault of his own. Nowadays, *nous avons changé tout cela*. It is not the fashion to believe in the stars, in fate, in the workings of an inherited curse. We are wiser than our forefathers; we reduce everything under a law of cause and effect; wonder, for us, exists no longer. We are enmeshed in the trammels of the commonplace, and we hug our chains, and glory that for us there is no longer mystery in the silence of the midnight or the marvel of the dawn. We have climbed the snow-capped mountains, we have plumbed the ocean depths,

we can tell the why and wherefore of every seeming miracle; and for us the thunder, which was once the frown of God, hurtles through an empty heaven, and is echoed back from an indifferent earth. Belief in the supernatural has fallen dead before the shafts of science; little by little our primeval faith in fay, in angel, in God, yields to the levelling flood of knowledge, and the fair dove Imagination can find no rest for the sole of her foot. Illusion no longer spreads her golden mists before our eyes, and life lies at our feet, colourless, tame, shorn of the beauty and interest that made it worth the living. What I am going to tell you sounds sheer folly in this most prosaic age, and yet I swear to you it is the very truth. I am a man under a curse, the most terrible curse of bringing certain harm on those I dare to love. You look incredulous; I was incredulous once, but cruel experience has taught me that to yield my heart to any living being is to insure swift destruction to the object of my love. There is only one course, therefore, left me to pursue—to fly from the person who has become so fatally dear, lest I bring on her the fate I would give my life to avert."

He paused, and Lilius looked at him in blank bewilderment, almost frightened by the impassioned earnestness of his manner.

"I really don't understand you, Sir Rawdon," she said at last.

"It is simply this: I love you, Lilius, and I would give my life to win you, if only for one hour, for my wife; but I dare not ask you, because I know too well it would involve you in my fate. I should go free; the thunderbolt would descend on you. I know it as surely as if I saw you lying dead before my eyes. To-night I shall leave England, and return to the loneliness which is my doom."

A bright colour rose in the girl's face; her head drooped forward till her hat concealed her features, and her hand

stole out to the man standing before her, white and rigid as a marble figure. He bent and kissed it, evidently holding himself in stern restraint by the power of his iron will.

"Good-bye, my darling; good-bye," he murmured under his breath; and feeling he was really going, Lilius, by a determined effort, steadied her voice to speak.

"Not good-bye? You will not leave me?"

"I must," he said between his teeth. "Lilius, don't make it harder for me than it is. For your sake, I must go."

"For my sake, you must stay!" and she suddenly looked up, a smile dawning in her blue eyes. "I don't believe in your mysterious doom. If you love me," and here her head again drooped forward, "you will not break my heart by going away."

"I swear to you, by God, that what I say is true."

There was torture in the low hoarse voice, the nails of the long nervous fingers were digging into the flesh, and cold drops of agony stood on the man's forehead.

"Then I will break the spell." The calm consciousness of power was in the girl's look and smile. "I believe that God is stronger than any evil fate, if such a thing can be, and He will have me in His keeping. Will you think me very bold," and a deep flush overspread her features, "if I tell you that I have thought of you night and day since I first saw you, and that I would rather die than you should sail away—alone?"

He flung himself on his knees before her, his face working with a passion he could not subdue.

"Oh, God!" he cried. "You love me, Lilius?"

"Why, yes," she answered, pouting her rosebud mouth. "You might have guessed it before, without making me almost propose to you."

With a cry which was a strange mingling of joy and despair, he rose and drew her into his arms.

"Fate is too strong. Lilias, my love, my life! surely your angel innocence will break the spell. I will believe it. My white Lily, you shall save me!"

In the silence which followed, Winifred, with burning cheeks, retreated down the rock. Her rapt interest in the lovers had prevented her from realising until this moment that she had been listening to what was not intended for her ears. Careless of consequences, she plunged into the water, waded ashore, crept silently behind the boathouse, unseen by the two beneath the rock, and flew up the path through the wood. To her surprise, Gerald was sitting under the beech-tree on the lawn.

"Here you are, little one. I hurried up to get home before the storm. Why, what is the matter with you?" and he glanced in surprise at Winifred's flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes.

"Oh, Gerald, such news!" She was fairly dancing in her excitement. "I know it was wrong to listen, but I never thought of it. Sir Rawdon did say such very funny things. I suppose it is not a secret, but I must tell you. He is going to marry Miss Graham."

"Uncle Rawdon,—impossible!"

The words came in a smothered tone from Gerald's lips, as with a violent start he sprang to his feet and gazed wildly at the child.

"But he is, indeed. I heard him say he loved her, and she said she loved him; and he is kissing her down in the bay. Oh, Gerald! what is the matter?"

For Gerald, white to the lips, was groping blindly for his chair, into which he sank with the dizzy air of a man stunned by a blow.

"Are you faint? Shall I get you some brandy or smelling-salts?" asked Winifred anxiously; when, to her further dismay, Gerald burst into a somewhat shaky laugh. The

notion of smelling-salts to cure a wound which cut to his very heartstrings, struck the young man, even in his first sore anguish, as irresistibly comic.

"I am all right, little one; don't alarm yourself. But are you sure it is true about—Miss Graham?"

The catch in his voice before he pronounced the name, gave Winifred an instantaneous perception of the truth; but she had sufficient self-control to keep the discovery to herself. She did not think Gerald would like to know that she had guessed his secret.

"It is quite true," she answered soberly. "We were both on the rocks, Miss Graham and I, when the *Silence* sailed into the bay. Sir Rawdon landed, and I hid, because I wanted to get away from him; but the tide had risen and cut me off, and I did not like to wet my feet, so I waited behind the rock and heard all they said, only I had to wade at last, for fear they should find out I was there. I think I had better go and change my stockings, or Elliot will be angry."

Intuitively conscious that Gerald would prefer being left alone, she ran off to the house, changed her wet things, and then stationed herself at a window commanding the gate into the wood, determined not to rejoin him until she saw the lovers approach.

A blinding flash of lightning, however, altered her intention in a moment. Suppose Gerald should stay out under the tree until he was struck by lightning? Judging by her stage experience, men disappointed in love were capable of any rash proceeding. Terrified at the idea, the next instant saw her flying over the grass to the tree under which Gerald was still sitting, leaning forward, with his head resting on his hand.

"Will you help me to take the chairs indoors?" she said quickly. "The storm is coming; I am afraid they will get wet."

He raised his head at the sound of the child's voice, and something in his expression reminded Winifred of the way he had looked at her the evening he had found her crying over the prospect of going to school.

"What did you say, little one?"

"We ought to take the chairs in, Gerald; did you not see the lightning? Just look at that cloud, it is as black as night."

Almost as she spoke, the cloud was rent by a vivid flash, forking downwards to the earth, and Winifred uttered a startled cry, catching hold of Gerald's arm.

He rose in a moment.

"Come along, Mignonette, it is time to get out of this;" and with his usual promptitude he tucked the two chairs under one arm, the child under the other, and turned towards the house, while the peal of thunder crashed deafeningly overhead.

They had barely deposited the chairs in safety, when Gerald's quick eyes caught sight of two figures advancing up the garden; and to Winifred's unbounded surprise and admiration, he stepped quietly forward to meet them. One glance at the new-comers' faces was sufficient to prove to him the truth of the little girl's tale. Lilius was radiant with happiness, and Sir Rawdon's dark eyes shone with almost feverish brilliancy, while his manner seemed joyous and eager as a boy's.

"Congratulate me, Gerald," he exclaimed, impulsively.
"Miss Graham has promised to be my wife."

"If papa does not mind," murmured Lilius, blushing and confused by this somewhat premature announcement.

"I do congratulate you," answered Gerald firmly, taking his uncle's proffered hand; and then he turned to Lilius, saying earnestly: "I wish you happiness, with all my heart."

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth than a blinding flash of lightning seemed to fork to their very feet, the ground shook beneath the mighty crash of thunder, and with a frightened cry Winifred pointed to a young laburnum-tree only a few yards away. It stood black and scorched as by the breath of a furnace, the green leaves, now dry and shrivelled, already fluttering to the earth. The next moment, with the sound of a rushing cataract, the cloud burst over their heads in a deluge of rain, mingled with pattering hailstones.

"Run, run!" cried Winifred; and she and Liliás flew towards the house, followed scarcely less swiftly by the two men. In spite of their haste, they received more than a sprinkling from the huge rain-drops; and by the time Winifred had produced dusters and rubbed everybody dry, none of the party seemed inclined to renew the subject which had been brought to such abrupt termination, especially as the almost continuous roar of thunder hardly permitted their voices to be heard.

Liliás stood by the window, looking out with quiet admiration at the storm. Entirely devoid of nervousness, she enjoyed the grand strife of the elements; while Sir Rawdon, after lingering for some time at her side, began to pace restlessly up and down the room. Poor Winifred had been thoroughly frightened and unnerved by the sight of the stricken tree, and noticing her pallor, and the way she started at every flash, Gerald seated himself in the darkest corner of the room, and drew the child on to his knees. Presently, hearing the voice of Liliás raised in apparent remonstrance, he turned his head to see that Sir Rawdon had stepped through the French window, and was standing unprotected in the rain.

"I say, uncle, you will get drowned," he called out.

"He says the room is close, and he wants air," explained

Lilias, turning, with rather a troubled expression. "I wish he would come in; he will get so wet."

Gerald rose, and holding Winifred, who would not leave him, by the hand, approached the window, with the intention of renewing his expostulations, when Sir Rawdon turned suddenly.

"Do you see what a wind has sprung up, Gerald?" he said, pointing to the trees in the garden, which were bending before a violent gust. "I am uneasy about my yacht. She might drag her anchors, and there is little sea-room in your bay. I think I had better be off; the worst of the storm is over."

"But you will get so wet," said Lilias, pleadingly.

"Water never hurts me. I am an amphibious animal," he answered, with a smile, taking her hands as she stood in the open window. "Good-bye, my Lilias; to-morrow I shall come and see your father."

"Only my father?" she asked demurely, with a mischievous glance from her blue eyes.

And perceiving that Gerald and Winifred had both left the room, Sir Rawdon bent and kissed her, holding her in his arms as if he would never let her go; until at a sudden sound, Lilias disengaged herself, blushing furiously, and Gerald appeared outside the window, equipped in cap and mackintosh, and carrying another waterproof garment over his arm.

"Put this on, uncle; I generally have two going. I am coming to see you off the premises."

"You are awfully good, my dear fellow;" and being of the same height, although of a slighter build than his nephew, Sir Rawdon buttoned himself into the ulster, and the two men started together, lifting their hats to Lilias as they turned away.

It was more than an hour before Gerald returned, to be greeted by Winifred with an exclamation of joy.

"Oh, Gerald, I have been so frightened ! I thought you must have been struck!"

"Why, you timid little mouse, the storm was miles away before I started. I have only been for a turn, to stretch my legs. Where is Miss Graham?"

"Gone home ; they sent the brougham for her. Aren't you very wet ?" and Winifred glanced out at the rain, which was still falling steadily.

"Rather ; I will go and change. I wish you could have been down in the bay, little one. It was the queerest sight I ever saw in my life. It was regular twilight, with the clouds and mists and black rocks ; one could hardly see the yacht at all. We hailed her, and the boat came off ; but just as Uncle Rawdon got on board, there was a flash which seemed to play all over her masts and yards, lighting her up for quite half-a-minute, till she looked like the phantom-ship in that Wagner opera I saw at Munich. I can tell you it was awfully queer ; and his face, too—I saw it distinctly —was for all the world like the Dutchman himself. I never realised there was anything uncanny about my uncle before, but I begin to think you are right, Mignonette. He is uncommonly like an animated corpse, when one comes to think of it."

"Are you sure the yacht was not struck ?" inquired Winifred, anxiously.

"Quite sure ; for I hailed them to know. It really looked awfully like it."

"It was very funny the way she sailed into the bay this afternoon," observed Winifred reflectively. "There was really no wind at all."

"Oh, she would catch every breath going. She is one of the fastest yachts afloat. Heigh-ho !" and Gerald smothered a sigh as he turned to ascend the stairs. "Corpse or no corpse, Uncle Rawdon is a tremendously lucky beggar."

CHAPTER VIII.

A House without Clocks.

“**W**INNIE,” said Nellie Graham suddenly, as the two children were playing together on the shore, “do you know if it is generally the way in a house for clocks to stop when people are engaged?”

“What do you mean?” asked Winifred, looking up in perplexity, as she stood barefooted in the water, helping Nellie to hunt for crabs.

“Well, the dining-room clock stopped the first day after the storm, when Sir Rawdon came to lunch, and we were told they were engaged; and the very next morning he and Liliás were hours in the drawing-room, and the clock had stopped just after he came in. Papa can’t set either of them going, and he has sent them into Aylsmouth. I wondered if the clocks were upset at the idea of Liliás going to be married. It really is *horrid!*” and Nellie sent a large stone flying vindictively into the sea. “There is Liliás perfectly wrapped up in a man she has only known a few days, and no good to anybody else. When he is there, she will look at no one but him; and when he isn’t, she sits and thinks about him. I will never make such a fool of myself over a strange man when I am grown up, hanged if I do!” and Miss Nellie, who delighted in picking up and retailing bits of slang from her schoolboy brothers, went splashing into a pool with a most determined look on her pretty little face.

“There’s a crab!” she screamed; “quick, Winnie, or he’ll be off.”

With her usual quick movements, Winifred gave chase,

and speedily captured the fugitive, which she held up gingerly between her finger and thumb.

"He is such a little one, Nellie; we had better let him go," she said, balancing herself on a rock, with the incoming waves just washing over her little white feet.

"You always want to let them go! Do as you like, but you are a soft!" said Nellie contemptuously, as Winifred gladly stooped to release her captive. "I suppose brothers-in-law are not such bad things," she continued meditatively, going back to the subject which engrossed her thoughts, "Sir Rawdon has given me a lovely gold Indian necklace, such a beauty; only, mother says it is too grand for me to wear. However, I may have it for the wedding; so you can see it then."

"When is the wedding to be?"

"On the 25th, this day month. Sir Rawdon is in such a hurry; and really Lilius is worse than no good, for they will sit in the arbour close to our gardens, and mother won't let Ernie and me work in them when they are there. Selfish things, they might just as well sit somewhere else; only, they think nobody can see them in the arbour. But we peep at them through the bushes, and it is perfectly sickening the way they go on. Thank goodness, Sir Rawdon has gone off now to get his house done up for Lilius. It will be great fun to go and stay with her when she is Lady Daubeny. Ernie and I are counting the days to the wedding. I am to be chief bridesmaid, before all the grown-up ones, and my frock will be simply lovely; and the breakfast is to be in a tent on the lawn; and there is to be a band, and the school-treat, and fireworks. It will be glorious, if it is only fine. I feel sometimes as if it would never come."

And Nellie was not the only person who entertained that sentiment. Sir Rawdon was in a state of feverish anxiety, which he found it hard to conceal. When in the presence of

his bride-elect, he was soothed and calmed by her tranquil happiness, and serene, sunny temperament; but away from her side, his morbid fears for the future returned in full force, and he blamed himself bitterly for having sinned against his better judgment in accepting her love and trust. At times this feeling was so strong within him that he more than once sat down to write a letter to break off the engagement, but he got no further than the penning of the girl's name at the head of the sheet. Her name alone was sufficient to conjure up before him, distinct in every line, the vision of Lilius on the shore, her beautiful flushed face and the appealing glance from her blue eyes, as she murmured piteously: "You will not break my heart by going away?"

The pen dropped from his fingers; he could not shatter her happiness, though he was prepared to sacrifice his own. And so the days passed on, and Lynscombe Towers was preparing to receive its new mistress, while the yacht was painted and furnished to such a state of perfection that she looked, as Gerald said, too smart to be real as, beflagged and begarlanded, she dropped anchor in Beechhaven bay on the morning of the 25th of July; Sir Rawdon having chosen, as usual, to sleep on board, rather than accept the proffered bed at the Cottage.

It was a glorious day, with a fair breeze, which augured well for the yacht's departure in the afternoon from Aylsmouth harbour, where she was to receive the bride and bridegroom. Sir Rawdon's fears seemed to be all laid to rest, and his face was radiant as he walked with Gerald, who had come to meet him, up through the beech-wood to the house. He was far too preoccupied to notice the somewhat incoherent nature of his companion's conversation, as the young man ran on from one subject to another, fearful lest his silence might lead to suspicion of his secret. He played his part well, and not a muscle of his face moved as Lilius swept up the aisle of

the church on her father's arm, looking more beautiful than he had ever seen her, with her sweet, serious face and downcast eyes, which were only lifted for a moment when Sir Rawdon approached to kneel by her side before the altar.

Forced, from his position, to take a prominent part in the proceedings, as the service began, Gerald found himself wedged into a group in the chancel and unable to escape, every syllable of the service fell with cruel distinctness on his ears. It had scarcely begun when a soft touch on his arm made him look down to see Winifred, chosen by Lilius as one of her bridesmaids, who now stepping slightly out of the ranks, had managed to approach him. She was looking very pretty in her white frock and hat, set off by the dark-red roses which mingled with the lilies in her nosegay; and as her little gloved hand slipped naturally into his, Gerald had not the heart to motion her back to her place. The crowd was so deep that no one noticed their attitude, and the clinging clasp of the tiny fingers carried strange power of comfort to the young fellow through the bitter ordeal of the marriage service. Only Winifred saw the sharp pain in the bright grey eyes, knew the reason of the convulsive grip on her hand as the irrevocable "I will" fell clearly and firmly from the bride's lips, and appreciated the courage with which he bore himself through the long, torturing hours, until, late in the afternoon, Sir Rawdon and Lady Daubeny departed on their drive to Aylsmouth, with a white slipper of Gerald's throwing reposing in triumph on the top of the brougham. Even then he was foremost in organising the children's games; and when the clear, warm night was closing in, it was to Gerald that the vicar appealed for assistance in the unaccustomed task of letting off the fireworks.

The festivities ended at last; and walking homewards through the quiet lane with Winifred, Gerald exclaimed, with heartfelt fervour :

"Thank goodness, that's over! He was a sensible fellow who first compared a marrying to a hanging. I hope it will be a precious long time before I am let in for another."

Winifred said nothing. She was pondering over a discovery she believed she had made that morning. When gathering roses near the open drawing-room window, she had unintentionally overheard a remark of Mrs. Daubeny's to her son :

"It is no use, my dear boy. I can't forget that, but for your absurd Quixotism, you might have been standing to-day in your uncle's shoes. If only you had let Winifred go to school——"

At which point Winifred, knowing she had no right to listen, had hastily retreated out of earshot. The speech came upon her like a flash of lightning, illuminating all that had been dark before. She had wondered so often why, if Gerald loved Lilius, he had made no attempt to win her—Winifred felt quite certain the girl could never have resisted him for a moment,—but now she understood it all. There was no room for them both in the house; how stupid of her not to think of it before. Gerald could only receive a wife by banishing his adopted sister. She remembered the look on his face the night he had promised that he would never send her away ; and the child's heart swelled with a passion of love and gratitude that made her long to throw herself on the ground and kiss his feet. She did not dare to broach the subject to him, but she glanced up at the bright stars, which her childish fancies had always associated with God's angels watching over the world, and breathed a mental vow that if Providence ever gave her the opportunity, she would sacrifice herself body and soul to minister to Gerald's happiness or need. Then, a little comforted, she ventured as far as she dared in replying somewhat tardily to his remark.

"I think weddings are horrid things, because they mean

change; and I do hope nothing will ever change at Beech-haven. I never thought I could be so happy as you have made me these last two years. If only I could do something to show you how I love you!"

Her earnest tone touched Gerald, but he answered lightly:

" You are the best little sister a fellow ever had, Mignonette; isn't that enough? You and I don't want to be sentimental; time enough for that when you are half-a-dozen years older. How would you like to go to Lyncscombe Towers next week? Uncle Rawdon has got me a week's leave to go and hurry up those workmen of his; and I have half a mind to take you with me."

" Oh, Gerald!" and Winifred drew a long breath of delight. " Do you mean it, really?"

" Really, if the mother can spare you."

" Then please ask her to-night, or I shall never go to sleep."

Gerald laughed, and promised compliance; and as Mrs. Daubeny made no objection to the plan, Winifred, after sleepless nights of excitement and a whole day spent in leave-taking, and in providing for the comforts of Mrs. Daubeny and the pets during her week's absence, found herself at last in the dogcart beside Gerald, driving to the station at Aylsmouth.

She could hardly remember her last railway journey, and her undisguised excitement and delight were a source of great amusement to her companion. To sit on the soft cushions opposite Gerald, and fly smoothly through the summer landscape, instead of toiling by dusty roads in the jolting caravan with vulgar, ill-tempered companions, was a change that seemed almost too delightful to be real. Novelty threw a charm over everything, even over the tough, coarse beef upon which they lunched at the junction; and when they alighted

at a pretty roadside station amongst wooded hills, Winifred could hardly find words to express her admiration. A footman, in the Daubeny livery of black and scarlet, was waiting on the platform, and a victoria, drawn by a pair of pretty chestnut horses, stood at the station door. The coachman turned round to touch his hat to Gerald, who greeted him in his usual frank, kindly manner, while he signed to Winifred to enter the carriage. The little girl obeyed, somewhat overawed by the unaccustomed surroundings, and sat up very straight by Gerald's side as the carriage drove away. One anxiety possessed her, however, and she asked him in a low tone after the safety of the luggage.

"It will come up in the cart. I pointed it out to Charles. That is the beauty of being rich, little one;" and Gerald leant back on the soft spring cushions with a smile. "You never have to bother after anything yourself."

"But I like to do things," said Winifred, "only it would be nice to have a carriage like this to take people for drives. It is so smooth, I think Mrs. Daubeny might almost go in it."

"She can't bear any sort of motion," said Gerald gravely. "I got her an invalid carriage once to try, but she has lost all her nerve—no wonder. She can't bear to find herself behind an animal of any kind, except her two-legged donkey."

"Poor Tomlins," laughed Winifred, thinking of the old man in his drab coat which never seemed to fit; and then she glanced at the smart servants on the box, and decided that appearance did count for something in the luxuries of life.

"Would you like to be rich?" she asked Gerald meditatively.

"Of course I should, little one. I hope I shall be decently off some time. Think of chucking up that beastly bank, and getting out all day with a horse or gun. I would sooner be a

farm labourer than a clerk, if I had my way: but beggars can't be choosers, worse luck, and it is a sin to grumble when I have got a whole week's holiday before me; only, if the fates had pitched it in September instead of August, I should have been more grateful. Look, Mignonette, that is the park, and here are the lodge-gates."

Winifred looked with eager interest at the great stone gateway and picturesque rose-covered cottage, at the smiling lodgekeeper's wife courtesying as the carriage rolled through into the park, at the herds of deer grouped under the grand old trees, at the long vistas of sunlit grass and fern, and, finally, at the grey castellated house, with the wooded hills rising behind it, and the ground falling in front towards a broad river which wound away like a silver ribbon down the green valley bounded in the sunny distance by ranges of far blue hills.

"What a lovely view!" she exclaimed; "and oh, Gerald, what a big house! It is like a hotel."

"Not quite so hideous, I hope, though it can't boast of much in the way of beauty; but I love the old place. I used to spend all my holidays here in my grandfather's time when the regiment was abroad, and I know every inch of the ground. Here we are, and there is dear old Mother Bunch on the steps to meet us."

The carriage clattered under a huge portico and stopped before the entrance-door, which was already open; the butler, an exceedingly pompous-looking individual, stood on the steps, and just behind him appeared an elderly woman, in a black silk gown, with rosy cheeks and bright hazel eyes; while a couple of footmen could be discerned, hovering in the background. Gerald lifted Winifred from the carriage, and passing the butler with a pleasant smile and greeting, led her up to the bright-eyed woman.

"Dear old Mother Bunch, I am glad to see you again," he

cried with boyish impetuosity, pressing her hand. "This is my little sister I told you about. You will adopt her as one of the family, won't you?"

"That I will, Master Gerald. Dear me! that you should need to ask. Welcome to the Towers, Miss Winifred, my dear. It is a long time since we had a young lady here, and you can guess we are the more glad to see you. It is a dull old place with no young life to hearten it up."

"Thank you," answered Winifred shyly, her soft brown eyes lifted to the housekeeper's face, while she offered her hand with a pretty childish grace that completely won the good woman's heart.

"Don't tell me the house is ever dull with you in it," said Gerald with a laugh. "You are younger than half the children nowadays, Mother Bunch!" and, taking Winifred's hand, he stepped over the threshold.

The child uttered an exclamation of surprise at sight of the great hall, which could comfortably have accommodated the whole of Beechhaven Cottage within its lofty walls. A feeling of awe stole over her at the impressive grandeur and simplicity of the oaken roof, the Gothic windows filled with rich stained glass, through which the afternoon sunlight was falling in rainbow flakes upon the stone floor, strewn here and there with soft skins and rugs. The walls were panelled to more than half their height, and hung with portraits, old weapons, and armour. Above the panelling, running the whole length of the hall opposite the windows, were frescoes representing scenes from the *Iliad*. There were two enormous fireplaces with quaint stone chimneypieces, and at either end a massive oak staircase led to a gallery with carved balustrades overhanging the hall. The furniture consisted solely of a couple of oak tables, and a few chairs and couches set against the walls, scarcely noticeable in the immensity of the edifice, which in size and shape closely resembled a college hall.

"What do you think of it, little one?" asked Gerald, amused at the child's astonished gaze. "Not bad for a private house, is it?"

"It is beautiful," said Winifred dreamily, speaking almost in a whisper, as if she feared the sound of her own voice. "It feels like being in church."

"Oh, you must not get that idea into your head, or you won't do much towards heartening up the place for Mother Bunch. "How are the workmen getting on, Sloman?" and he turned toward the butler, to find him staring fixedly at Winifred.

"I beg pardon, what did you please to say, sir?"

Gerald repeated the question; but as the little girl moved a few steps forward to obtain a better view of the frescoes, he asked the man, an old family servant, in a low tone, why he was looking so hard at the child.

"I can't exactly say, sir. Perhaps it will come back to me in time; but there's a strong likeness in her face to someone I used to know, and I can't rightly get a-hold of who it was."

"Someone who came to the Towers, Sloman?"

"Must have been, sir. I have never been away from Lynscombe since I come as page-boy at fourteen, except the time when Sir Rawdon had his house in London; that will be nigh twelve years ago now; and he only took it for six months, and did not stay there three. About them workmen, sir,"—and Sloman rambled off into details of painting and papering, to which Gerald listened as in duty bound, although his eyes followed Winifred as she moved slowly along, her hat falling back on her neck, while her rapt eager little face was upturned to the paintings on the wall.

"Mignonette," he called presently, and the child came quickly towards him.

"Oh, Gerald, what splendid figures! I should like to look at them day."

"You can come back as often as you like, little enthusiast," he said, smiling. "Now go with Mother Bunch, and we will have tea in her room, which is the nicest place in the whole house. I will come to you in a few minutes when I have seen after these bothering workmen."

It was fully half an hour before Gerald could get away from the numerous demands upon his attention; and opening the door of the cheerful housekeeper's room, he found the teapot covered and waiting, the table loaded with cakes and fruit, and Winifred, curled up in one of the deep window-seats, caressing a huge tabby cat, and listening with deep interest to the housekeeper's stories of "Master Gerald's boyish pranks." The child had lost her shyness, and seemed quite at home with the kindly woman, whose real patronymic was Mrs. Bunser, Gerald having bestowed the nickname upon her at a very early period of his career. They were a merry little party as they gathered round the table, Gerald brimful of fun and jokes, into which the housekeeper, although always preserving her respectful demeanour, was not slow to enter.

Gerald was a universal favourite at the Towers, where, indeed, Sir Rawdon's marriage was strongly resented by the old servants, who had come entirely to regard "the young master" as the heir. He was secretly dreading the inevitable questions he must answer concerning their new mistress, but to his surprise and relief, Mrs. Bunser exhibited no curiosity on the subject, merely referring in general terms to "her ladyship." He did not guess he was indebted for this respite to Winifred, who had given the housekeeper full particulars concerning the wedding and the bride, whom she described as so beautiful, that all the gentlemen about Dering were in love with her and very envious of Sir Rawdon for carrying her off; and whether it was the child's tone or the look in her expressive eyes as she made the remark, Mrs. Bunser, who was remarkably clear-sighted, drew her own conclusions, and

forbore to torment Gerald with questions about his uncle's wife.

When tea was over he took Winifred over the house, the child's astonishment and delight increasing at every step. The size and number of the rooms, the rich furniture and decorations, the costly china and ornaments, seemed to realise her visions of a fairy palace, or a tale of the *Arabian Nights*; but she was fairly struck dumb on entering the long picture-gallery, containing a rare collection of old and modern masters. She wanted to study each picture, and puzzled Gerald by her questions on the names and history of the artists.

"How very rich Sir Rawdon must be!" she said in an awe-struck tone, when Gerald at last carried her away.

"He is fairly well off, but the things have accumulated for centuries. Every owner of the house added something. You must get Mother Bunch to hold forth to you on the family history. She is far better up in it than I am."

"There is only one thing that is funny," said Winifred: "there are so few clocks, and none of them going. How do people tell the time in this house?"

"Like savages, by the sun and their appetites," answered Gerald with a laugh. "Uncle Rawdon has a prejudice against clocks, chiefly, I believe, because he is the most unpunctual man that ever lived. He has condescended to leave the big clock over the stables which chimes the quarters, and he has a most elaborate arrangement of hour-glasses in his room. Sloman and Mother Bunch are permitted clocks in the servants' quarters, so the meals are punctual if the master is not."

To Winifred's great pride, she found herself, for the first time that evening, promoted to the dignity of late dinner, while she was hugely flattered to see that Gerald had dressed on her account as if she were a grown-up lady. Certainly it was somewhat embarrassing to sit facing him across an ex-

panse of flowers and plate which seemed immense in her eyes, although dinner was served in the small private dining-room. She was very shy of the tall, powdered footman behind her chair who handed her the silver dishes, and of the butler who wanted to fill her glass with champagne, but Gerald came promptly to the rescue with an order for lemonade, and suffered her to follow her own taste by dining exclusively off soup and chicken. He did not seem in the least awed by the servants, and told such amusing stories that Winifred grew quite at her ease, as her merry laugh rang through the room, while the butler's face became preternaturally grave, and the footmen, who had not attained to such sublime control over their features, had more than once to turn away to conceal a smile.

Winifred never forgot that evening, and the stroll with Gerald on the terrace, from which they could see the full moon rising above the trees, only the second moon since the night when she had watched the lovers on the yacht. What wonderful things had happened in the interval! Perhaps in another month Liliás and Sir Rawdon would be standing in the moonlight on that very spot; and what of those strange things he had said to his bride which had made Winifred's blood run cold, although Liliás had taken them so calmly! What of this mystic curse, which he had so solemnly declared was upon him? Could Liliás break the spell, or would she be called upon to suffer for her rashness in having given no heed to the warning?

"Are you cold, little one?" asked Gerald, feeling the child shiver, as her hand rested on his arm. "Let us go to the walled garden, it is always sheltered there;" and in spite of Winifred's protestations that she was perfectly warm, he tossed away the end of his cigar, and led her through a gateway on to a gravel-path running under a high wall.

The full moon cast alternate bands of light and shadow

at their feet, and the air was heavy with a strong sweet perfume which was new to the child.

"What is that scent?" she asked.

Gerald pointed towards a flower-border they were approaching, and Winifred saw, on long, slender stalks, clusters of white starry blossoms gleaming in the moonlight.

"That is the tobacco flower," he said. "At night it rivals Shelley's tuberose—

'The sweetest flower for scent that blows.'

But don't come and look at it in the blaze of the sun, Mignonette. You will see nothing but shrivelled brown petals, looking as dead as door-nails. They only open when the heat is past."

"How lovely they are! It is like the fairy story of the princess who was only young and beautiful in the moonlight," said Winifred eagerly, bending over the border. "I think things in real life are far more strange and beautiful than anything we can imagine."

"Perhaps they are to those who have fairy godmothers to grant their wishes," answered Gerald. "To most of us life is a trifle flat, little one."

Winifred turned hastily from the border, and slipped her arm through her companion's, vexed with herself for having made such a heedless speech. From that moment the scent of the tobacco flower was indelibly associated in her mind with Gerald's secret and her consequent vow.

The week at Lynscombe Towers passed like a dream of joy to Winifred. There was nothing to cast a shadow over her perfect happiness. Gerald was very much occupied with the workpeople; but the child was quite content to be left with the pictures or frescoes for the hour together, and when she wanted company Mrs. Bunser was always ready to tell her stories of the family in whose service she had passed her life. Winifred learned all the histories of the family portraits,

from the Tudor ladies and gentlemen in enormous ruffs down to Sir Rawdon's father and his two wives; but the portrait that aroused her deepest interest was that of Sir Rawdon himself. When alone, she would stand before it, trying to fathom the expression of those deep dark eyes, which seemed to her even more sinister on canvas than in life. Sir Rawdon had been probably bored by the sittings, and the artist had caught the least genial aspect of his handsome, haughty face.

Every afternoon she drove out with Gerald in the park-phaeton with a pair of iron-grey thoroughbreds, and enjoyed watching how perfectly his hands controlled their fiery spirits. On the last day he took a longer drive than usual, and coming home, full six miles from the Towers, one of the horses cast a shoe. Gerald uttered an exclamation of annoyance. He was more careful of his uncle's horses than he would have been of his own.

"Which is the nearest forge?" he asked of the groom.

"Chesney, sir, close to 'The Duke's Head'; nigh a mile from here."

"I know, on the high-road to Kenningborough;" and Gerald turned the horses at right-angles over the common they were crossing. "It is a queer old inn, Mignonette," he continued, "a grand place in coaching days, but is almost deserted now; you will like to see it. There was a woman killed there in rather an odd way some years ago, and I believe they say it is haunted."

"Haunted by the woman's spirit?" asked Winifred fearfully, her eyes dilating at the thought.

"So they say. My dear little girl, you are surely not afraid of a ghost in daylight; and anyhow you are quite safe in my company. Ghosts have no fancy for me. I have slept more than once in authenticated haunted chambers, and seen and heard nothing bigger than a rat, to which I would prefer a well-behaved ghost any day."

Gerald rattled on in his usual laughing fashion, yet could not succeed in dissipating the curious sense of nervousness which had taken possession of the child, and seemed to grow with each moment as they approached the inn. But for very shame she would have begged Gerald to let her remain outside, when the greys drew up before a rambling gabled house, with an indistinguishable sign hanging above the door.

CHAPTER IX.

The Inn Mystery.

HE arrival of visitors seemed totally unexpected at "The Duke's Head," certainly of visitors in a phaeton and pair. Not a living creature appeared in sight, except an old dog, who woke with a lazy growl from his nap in the sun, and a few chickens pecking about the door. By the time, however, Gerald had alighted, and lifted Winifred to the ground, a man in shirt-sleeves, hastily wiping his hands, came from some inner region, and a lad, presumably an ostler, ran out of the stable-yard.

"One of the horses has cast a shoe," said Gerald, addressing the wearer of the shirt-sleeves. "I suppose you can put the carriage up while the groom takes him to the forge?"

"Yes, sir; certainly, sir. Will you please to walk this way?"

The words came in a nervous, spasmodic fashion, as the man sidled before them into the house. He was slight and wiry-looking, with a meek face, sandy beard, and freckled skin. The entrance passage looked gloomy, and was sadly in want of paint; the low, fusty sitting-room, into which he conducted the visitors, looked gloomier still.

"Have you a garden?" asked Gerald quickly; "we would rather sit out of doors."

The man scratched his head, looking at his visitors as if they were some strange kind of animals.

"There's the summer parlour, sir," he answered; "but the missus—maybe she wouldn't like it."

"Are you the landlord?"

"Yes, sir; but —"

"Then show me the summer parlour?"

Gerald's tone was so authoritative that the man yielded at once, turned the key in a door at the opposite end of the room, and ushered them into another, smaller, but loftier, with windows opening to the ground, evidently a more recent addition to the house. Folding back the shutters, he revealed a pretty old-fashioned garden, with a stretch of grass and a border of herbaceous flowers.

"Come, this is better," said Gerald. "Can you make us some tea? And you may bring me a brandy-and-soda,—with which I shall water the flowers," he added, turning to Winifred with a laugh as the landlord left the room. "The brandy is sure to be vile; but one must order something more than tea. Mignonette, how white you look! What is it, child?"

The little girl was clinging to his hand, which she had never released since entering the house, while she gazed round the room, a look of apprehension in her soft eyes. There seemed little to rouse her alarm, the furniture being of the usual country-inn type—a round table in the centre of the room, two springless arm-chairs, covered with bright green rep and netted antimacassars, on each side of the paper-filled grate; a small chiffoniere against the wall opposite the window; while the wall facing the fireplace was occupied by a tall, old-fashioned clock, with a carved wooden case, and a face grotesquely enamelled in the form of a human countenance. Beside it was a door, partly open, which revealed a steep flight of stairs leading to a room overhead.

"I don't feel as if I could breathe in here," murmured Winifred, fearfully. "Please, Gerald, may we go into the garden?"

"Well, it is stuffy; I will open the window. There,"

drawing up an arm-chair beside it, "sit down, and you will be all right. We must wait till the landlord comes back."

Winifred obeyed, fixing an intent gaze upon the clock at the foot of the stairs.

"What a horrible face it has," she observed with a shudder.

"It is awfully quaint," said Gerald, with sudden interest. "It must be as old as the hills; and, by Jove, what a demoniacal grin there is on the face! I don't know when I have seen anything so downright vicious. I wonder Uncle Rawdon, with his love for curiosities, has not spotted it before now; though, to be sure, his tastes don't exactly lie in the clock line."

He approached the clock as he spoke, when, to his amazement, Winifred sprang from her chair, and, with a little cry, laid her hand on his arm.

"Oh, please, don't go near it! it frightens me. Do come out of this horrible room!"

"My dear child, are you crazy? What's the matter with the room?"

"I don't know; it frightens me," she said, with a little catch of her breath. "I think the murder must have been done here."

"It was not a murder, that I know of," said Gerald. "Winifred, you are surely not such a baby as to be frightened by an ugly face? Come and look at it with me."

His grave manner alarmed the child even more than her nervous tremors. Gerald never called her "Winifred" in that serious tone unless he were really displeased. With all his gentleness, she knew he had no mercy on cowardice; and in silence she let him draw her forward until they stood before the clock.

"It is simply grotesque," he said; "nothing alarming close by. You are as bad as a shying horse, little one."

He looked down at Winifred with a kindly smile, only to discover, to his intense amazement, that she was deadly pale, and shaking from head to foot. Lifting her in his arms, he carried her back to the chair, in which he placed her at the moment the landlord entered with a tray of bottles and glasses.

"Give me some soda-water, quick!" he said. "The young lady feels faint."

Hastily catching up a tumbler, which the man filled, he added a dash of brandy, and gave it to Winifred to drink.

"Hot day, sir!" observed the landlord, regarding the child with mild interest in his weak hazel eyes. "Can assure you, sir, have been sometimes took that way myself. Thank you, sir," as Gerald mixed him a glass. "Your good health and the young lady's. Your sister, sir?"

"My adopted sister," said Gerald, anxiously watching Winifred, to whose cheeks a faint colour was beginning to return.

"Ah! indeed, sir; something like my missus, if you will excuse my mentioning it. She wanted to adopt poor Mrs. Vavasour's baby. Friends took it away; good thing for us. Hard enough to make ends meet as it is. Can't let these rooms since Mrs. Vavasour's death. Folks say she walks; never heard nothing myself, but for certain she brought us ill-luck."

"Then she was killed here?" asked Winifred quickly, upon whose ears not a word of this speech had been lost.

"That she was, miss. Lor! I shall never forget the morning when I walked in and found her lying stiff and stark against that clock there. It give me such a turn as I couldn't even call for help."

"That will do," said Gerald quickly; "you are frightening the young lady."

"Oh, no! Please, I want to hear about it," said Winifred eagerly. "Who was Mrs. Vavasour, and who killed her?"

"No one killed her, miss, unless so be it was her husband struck her down, but my missus won't hear tell of that. She had a fancy for the young fellow. Rather suspicious though, his disappearing that very night, and never being heard of again. The poor thing had fallen and cut her head open against the clock. Doctor said she must have been killed on the spot—hours before I found her."

"And who was she?" asked Winifred.

"Don't know, miss, no more than the name, Mrs. Charles Vavasour. Lady and gentleman drove up one day, took the rooms for six weeks, arranged with my missus to get a nurse, and child was born some ten days afterwards. My missus she took a fancy to the poor young thing, though she had a queer foreignish way about her. She was cut-up when it happened; never saw her take on so."

"Do you mean you found the wife dead, and the husband gone?" asked Gerald, interested in spite of himself. "That is a very strange story."

"Just what the Coroner said at the inquest, sir. Police were after Mr. Vavasour, but nothing was ever heard of him again. You see, he was used to come and go by this window and the little gate down the garden, without disturbing the house. They had these two rooms to themselves—this and the bedroom over. Nurse was gone. Mr. Vavasour had moved into his wife's room, and no one slept this end of the house."

"What became of the child?"

"My missus looked after it. We found it crying upstairs. Doctor said mother must have died about midnight. She was wonderful loth to part with it when the mother's friends come to take it."

"Rudd, Rudd!" called a shrill voice from the passage; and the landlord, with a startled "Excuse me, sir; here's my missus come back," disappeared with amazing celerity.

"There's a hen-pecked husband for you," said Gerald with a laugh. "I wonder if the virago will appear upon the scene? How are you, little one?" and he laid his hand tenderly on the child's shoulder. "Feel better, eh?"

"Much better," said Winifred with a grateful smile. "I don't mind now I know all about it. It is when I can't understand things they frighten me. I felt that horrid clock had something to do with it."

"My dear Mignonette, you really must not let your imagination run away with you in this outrageous fashion," said Gerald seriously; "I don't know what you will come to. If the clock was connected with the story, it has nothing on earth to do with you and me."

"I suppose it hasn't," said Winifred penitently. "I am very sorry, Gerald."

"Never mind, little one; you were a good child to do as I told you. Here comes our tea, I hope," he added, as the outer door opened to admit a small sharp-featured women, with keen eyes and a prompt, decisive manner.

"I am sorry to keep you waiting, sir," she said, addressing Gerald, in a tone which sounded quite cultured after the landlord's slipshod grammar. "I was out when you arrived, and my husband had not even the thought to put the kettle on to boil; but the tea will be ready immediately. Mercy me!"

This exclamation was occasioned by the woman suddenly catching sight of Winifred's pale face in the chair as Gerald slightly moved from his position in front of her.

"The young lady is quite well now," he said, annoyed that attention should again be called to the child's nervous pallor.

"It's not that, sir; but I never saw such a likeness in my life. Who is she, sir, begging your pardon for the question?"

"My adopted sister, Miss Winifred Flowers."

The woman looked disappointed; evidently the name recalled no associations to her mind.

"Would you mind telling me, miss, if you are any relation to poor Mrs. Vavasour?" she asked with restrained eagerness.

"I don't think I can be," said Winifred. "I never heard her name before to-day. Why do you ask me?"

"Because you are as like her as two peas. It gave me such a turn coming in; I thought for the moment it was her herself. She was not twenty, poor young thing, and just a child's face, so young and innocent. How old are you, miss?"

"I was eleven in May."

"And it was just eleven years last month since Mrs. Vavasour's death. The baby was born in June, and it was just over the month when the mother died. Oh, sir!" and she turned appealingly to Gerald, "are you sure this isn't my dear young lady's child?"

"I am afraid that is quite impossible," he answered. "Miss Winifred lost her mother only two years ago, and her father is still alive."

"And what sort of looking man is he, sir?"

"Dark, with very prominent teeth," said Gerald shortly.

"Ah! then it couldn't be. Mr. Vavasour—Charlie, his wife used to call him—was very fair, with light hair and blue eyes; rather pale-looking and slight; not at all the sort of man to get in a passion and knock his wife about, whatever the Coroner might say. Why, he worshipped the ground she trod on, poor young thing!"

"And who took the child?"

"Mrs. Harvey was the name—a pleasant-spoken lady; but cried so under her veil, I couldn't get a good sight of her face. She said Mrs. Vavasour had been her greatest friend,

and she had promised her, if anything happened, to be a mother to her child."

"No relation, then?"

"No, sir; but I couldn't keep the baby back after her saying that, though it went to my heart to part with the little thing, having lost my own baby the year before, and the poor mother dying in such a terrible way."

"But who was this Mr. Vavasour, the father?" asked Gerald. "Surely something was known about him?"

"Not a thing, sir. The account was in all the papers. If he had friends and relations, they kept it to themselves; for not a soul attended the inquest, though he had gone to dine with a friend in Kenningborough the very evening it happened."

"Kenningborough is a good way off. What time did he get home?"

"That's what no one knows, sir. It was the first time he had ever left Mrs. Vavasour for more than to take a short drive or walk. He ordered our trap to take him into Kenningborough, which is a good five miles, and said he should walk home. She came to the door to see him off, and I heard him tell her not to expect him before midnight. 'I will try not to be later than that, but don't sit up for me, darling,' he said. And then he kissed her, and drove away. God knows if she ever saw him again; we never did."

"What became of your trap then?" asked Gerald, with his usual practical turn of mind.

"Our boy went with him to drive it back, and said Mr. Vavasour got out at the beginning of the High Street, and sent him home. I shall never forget that evening. I helped Mrs. Vavasour to bathe the baby and put it to bed. She had no nurse. She said they could not afford one; they were poor at present, but she thought they would soon become rich, Mr. Vavasour was so clever. I asked her what his

profession was, but she did not seem to understand, and went running on about something else. She was French, and had only lived two years in England, though she told me her mother had been English. Her father and mother were dead, and she had an uncle and cousins in London, from whom she had run away when she married. She talked very plain English, though she had a pretty way of saying her words, and throwing her hands about when she spoke. Poor young thing! she was in high spirits that evening, and made me laugh with her fun about our English ways. I sat with her till going on for ten o'clock, and wanted to stay with her till Mr. Vavasour came back; for my mind misgave me somehow. But she wouldn't have it; and she was as determined as could be when she took a fancy into her pretty head. 'You are sleepy, my good Mrs. Rudd,' she said; 'you go to bed; for me, I am not sleepy—not at all. I shall wait here until my Charlie comes.' 'But I don't like to leave you alone, ma'am,' I said, 'so late at night.' 'Ah bah!' she answered, with a pretty grimace; 'I have no fear, and there is your ugly old clock for company, which ticks so loud I can hardly hear if my baby cries upstairs.' 'Then let me shut the windows and the shutters, ma'am,' I said; for though there is never a soul past our house at night, I did not like leaving her with the lamp on the table, showing her all alone in the room. 'But no,' she said; 'the night is hot and dark. I need the air, and Charlie will need the light to cross the garden. Go to bed, my good Mrs. Rudd; sleep well, and have no fear for me.' And the last I saw of her alive she was leaning back in that chair, drawn up to the window, just as the young lady is sitting now, and nodding at me over her shoulder with the lamp-light full on her pretty pale face and big shining eyes. I wish I had a picture of her to show you the likeness. They did let me keep some of hers; but, of course, she did not draw her own face."

"She was an artist, then?" asked Gerald.

"Her father was, sir—a French artist, she told me. There's a picture she made of him I had framed, and hung in my parlour."

"Did Mr. Vavasour take nothing with him when he disappeared?"

"None of his clothes, sir. He evidently had not been upstairs. Neither of them had slept in the bed; and the only thing missing was a desk, which was lying on the table when I left the room. It must have had all Mr. Vavasour's money and papers in it; for nothing was found but a few letters, mostly in French, addressed to Mrs. Vavasour. The clothes and bits of jewellery were sold to pay for the funeral. Well, Rudd, I should think you have been to Kenningborough to fetch the boiling water."

This withering sarcasm being addressed to the landlord, who now entered with the tea-tray.

"Kettle didn't boil before; fact, it didn't," he muttered under his breath, and the moment his wife's back was turned he hastily left the room.

"May I see Mrs. Vavasour's pictures?" asked Winifred, looking eagerly at Mrs. Rudd, as the landlady brought her a cup of tea.

"That you shall, miss, and anything else you fancy. Indeed, it is more than I can believe that you are not the poor young thing's daughter."

"I don't see how I can be," said Winifred gently. "Would you mind telling me how long you have had that clock, Mrs. Rudd?" and she pointed to the grinning face against the wall.

"Just the question Mrs. Vavasour asked. She never liked it, though she used to make fun over its being so ugly. My man picked it up cheap in a sale when we were married and took the business. I told him I didn't fancy it at all, but he

thought it was a handsome bit of furniture. It belonged to an old gentleman who went mad, and blew his brains out. One of his servants has told us since that it was said to have been made by a famous man, who lived in the time of the King Charles that climbed the oak; and this man knew all about the stars and spells and such like things, and sent that clock as a present to an enemy he wanted to be revenged on. Soon afterwards the enemy died of the plague, and the clock has brought misfortune on whoever has had to do with it since; but there, I don't believe a word of it. It's a thorough good clock, that I can say; and the man who made it knew his business, and no mistake, for it never alters a minute. I have often thought of having it out in the passage, but it is heavy to move."

"I should not like it in my house," said Winifred, with an involuntary shudder; and then, as Gerald went out to see if the carriage was ready, she reminded Mrs. Rudd of the promise to show her the pictures.

There were two or three spirited water-colour sketches in a portfolio, a London flower-girl, a sentry in his bearskin, a Metropolitan policeman, chance figures which had evidently struck the French girl's fancy; but what chiefly attracted Winifred's attention was a framed portrait in chalks, representing a fine-looking, intellectual man, with a somewhat rugged face, and thoughtful, deep-set eyes. She was still standing before it when Gerald returned to fetch her.

"That is a good face," he said, "and splendidly drawn. I should say it is a capital likeness. What is the name underneath? René Souliard."

"The same Christian name as his daughter, only hers was written with a double e. Rainay, she told me it was called. You will bring Miss Winifred to see me again, won't you, sir?"

"I am afraid I can't promise," said Gerald. "We are

only on a visit to my uncle's house, Lynscombe Towers, and go home to-morrow. We live near Aylsmouth, by the sea, a long way from here,"

Poor Mrs. Rudd looked woefully disappointed. She took a tender farewell of Winifred, and stood watching the carriage from the door as long as it was in sight.

"I suppose I couldn't have been the baby," said Winifred thoughtfully; "but it is very funny, isn't it Gerald?"

"It is rather, but one does hear of chance resemblance sometimes. Poor Mrs. Rudd seemed quite distressed at parting with you. I wonder how many more people will want to adopt you, Mignonette?"

"It is very kind of her," said Winifred, with a contented smile, "only she can't—not, at least, until you are tired of me, Gerald."

She spoke the last sentence in French, lest it should reach to the ears of the groom behind; and for the first time the purity of her accent and pronunciation struck Gerald with a sense of wonder. She had only learned the language a few months from Mrs. Daubeny, and it had never occurred to him before that it was singular an English child should so quickly acquire such fluency in a foreign tongue. Her "*jusque ce que je vous ennuie*" was uttered with the intonation of a Parisian. Either the child must possess a remarkable gift for learning foreign languages, or her pronunciation must be the consequence of descent from a French-speaking family. And now that his attention was drawn to the subject, he reflected that Winifred's pretty, graceful manner, her animation when speaking, and the little gestures that invariably accompanied her words, were certainly more French than English.

At the first opportunity after their return home, he related the whole story to his mother, confiding to her the suspicions he had formed.

"I remember you told me you could not believe that Flowers was Winifred's father," said Mrs. Daubeny thoughtfully. "It is possible Mrs. Flowers may have adopted her friend's child. Those theatrical people think nothing of changing their names; but we have no means of proving it, nor of solving the mystery of this Mr. Vavasour's disappearance. I should not disturb Winifred's mind with the possibility, if I were you. It would be a great shock to her, the bare idea that Mrs. Flowers was not her own mother. Best let well alone. Still, when you are at the Towers again, you might see the woman, and try to learn some further particulars of the affair."

"It will be a good while before I am at the Towers again," said Gerald quietly. "I have arranged to take my holiday from the 15th of September, mother."

And Mrs. Daubeny began cheerfully discussing the plans for her son's tour, without making any reference to the fact that Sir Rawdon and his bride were expected at Dering about the middle of the same month.

Charming letters from the bride were constantly arriving at the Vicarage. Lilius seemed radiantly happy, and was delighted with the grand scenery of Norway, which she now saw for the first time, her only grievance being that Sir Rawdon absolutely refused to exchange the yacht for the pretty inns on the fiords. "He really is as fussy as an old woman," she wrote to her mother; "his dread of damp beds amounts to a mania—a man who has slept under canvas in Africa for months at a time! He puts it all on my account, and won't believe that I should really enjoy roughing it. He goes on as if I were a bit of china, and would break at a touch. It is very sweet of him, of course; but I should like a little more liberty."

The weather was very fine, and it was not until the third week in September that the *Silence*, after a splendid run across

the North Sea, late one evening dropped anchor in Aylsmouth Harbour. A messenger was despatched to announce her arrival at Dering, and Lilius and her husband drove over the next morning, to find the whole population of the village lining the road, and the church bells clanging overhead with a vigour that made Sir Rawdon wince. Several letters were awaiting him at the Vicarage; and amongst them a telegram, which he showed to his wife and her family, summoning him on important business to town. He seemed much distressed at parting from Lilius, but started for London the same afternoon. The Grahams were not very sorry at his departure. They had seen so little of the baronet that he was still almost a stranger; and it was delightful to have Lilius to themselves, and learn from every look and tone that her new life was, in very truth, as bright and happy as even they could have desired. Sir Rawdon's business proved so engrossing, that he was detained until the very day before the one he had fixed for taking his wife home to the Towers. He was expected by a late train from London, when in the course of the evening Lilius received a telegram to say he had missed it, and would come down by the mail and sleep on the yacht.

The same afternoon Lilius had paid a farewell visit to Beechhaven Cottage, and preferred a request that Winifred might be permitted to accompany Nellie on a visit that autumn to the Towers.

"Mother and dad say they can't possibly leave home till after Christmas," she said, "so Nellie is to be my first visitor, and it would be very nice for her to have Winifred for company. They could go out, and have their tea together; and Winifred is such a model child, I could trust her to keep Nellie out of mischief."

"I daresay it would be pleasanter for you," said Mrs. Daubeny, smiling at the young wife's ruse for diverting Miss Nellie's sharp eyes from perpetual observation of her newly-

married sister; "but would Rawdon care to have her, as Winifred is no relation?"

"Yes, Rawdon said he should like her to come some time, which made me first think of the plan. He made such a funny speech about her. Let me see if I can remember it. He said she was a living incarnation—no, embodiment. Yes, that was it—a living embodiment of one of his horrors. I told him if that were the case, I should have thought he would prefer her at a distance; but he only smiled in the queer way he does sometimes, and said he was glad I was of that opinion. I can't imagine what he meant, and he turned it off when I asked him to explain. I think, from being so much alone, he has fallen into a way of speaking his thoughts out loud, without stopping to arrange them as other people do, which has rather a bewildering effect. I shall cure him of it in time. About Winifred, Mrs. Daubeny. May she come?"

"With pleasure, since you are so kind as to ask her. I can answer for it, Gerald will have no objection. When will you like her to go?"

* "In November, I think. Rawdon says we will have no grand visitors till after Christmas, so that I can learn to be hostess by degrees. I am rather nervous at the prospect; but he is so good: he never laughs, or is angry, when I make a mistake. He is the kindest man that ever lived; but I must not bore you with my raptures. Good-bye, dear Mrs. Daubeny; I do wish you could come to see us at the Towers."

And bending her beautiful face, Lilia warmly kissed the invalid, who looked after her with softened eyes as she left the room.

"She is a dear girl. Heaven grant she may be happy with Rawdon!" murmured Mrs. Daubeny to herself; "but I fear, I fear—he is a very strange man. If she had only married Gerald!" and with a deep sigh she let her head fall back upon the couch.

CHAPTER X.

A Shadow and a Fear.



H ! please, please, Gerald, let me stay at home ! You will not send me away to the Towers without you ? ”

“ My dear little girl,”—and Gerald looked in surprise at the anxious face and pleading eyes, as Winifred followed him into the smoking-room on the evening of his return from his holiday,—“ the mother thought you would like to go. I really can’t interfere with her arrangements at the last minute.”

“ I thought it was no use to tell her,” said Winifred despairingly, “ so I waited for you. We are not to go for another fortnight, you know,” she added coaxingly, kneeling on the rug beside his arm-chair.

“ But what excuse could we make ? Come, Mignonette, be reasonable. What has poor Uncle Rawdon done to you that you should funk the bare idea of seeing him ? You really could not look more alarmed if it was your father himself.”

“ If it were father,” said Winifred, “ he would swear at me and beat me ; I should know what to expect : but I don’t know with Sir Rawdon, that is the dreadful part. I wish I could tell the meaning of the way he looks at me sometimes.”

“ Winifred, I should be very wrong if I allowed you to give way to these fancies,” said Gerald seriously. “ If you have no real reason to give me, I must insist upon your going to the Towers, as Lady Daubeny has arranged.”

The child gave one startled look into his grave face, and hid her own upon the arm of his chair.

"I will go to the Towers; I will do anything you wish," she cried impulsively, "if only you won't be angry with me, Gerald."

"That's a good child," he said, laying his hand on her soft dark hair. "You will find you will have a very jolly time with Mother Bunch and Nellie. Uncle Rawdon will be far too busy with his own affairs to take any notice of a chit like you. Now that is settled, suppose you hand me those cigars, and then see what you can find in this parcel I have brought you from Paris."

Winifred took the packet with eager face, the dreaded visit entirely forgotten in the delightful excitement of removing the paper and opening the little box beneath. The contents exceeded her wildest hopes, for in the box lay a tiny enamelled silver watch and chain.

"Oh, Gerald!" Two soft arms were round the young man's neck, and he was hugged, cigar and all, by the enraptured child. "A real watch for me! I never dreamed of such a thing. How very, very good of you."

"There, that will do, Mignonette; you need not strangle me. So you like it, eh?"

There was no need to ask that question. Winifred's face was sufficient answer, as she sat on the rug at Gerald's feet, examining her new possession. Surely such a wonderful, beautiful watch even Paris could never have produced before!

"Now I shall expect you to be as punctual as a soldier, little one," he said, expelling a cloud of smoke, and watching the child with amused eyes. "No more dreams, and excuses that you did not know the time, or I shall be down upon you."

"I shall know the time at the Towers now," exclaimed Winifred triumphantly; "and I can tell it to Nellie. She has not got a watch."

And this delightful prospect seemed to reconcile Winifred in surprising fashion to the stern inevitable, in the shape of her visit to Lynscombe Towers. At any rate, Gerald heard no more entreaties, although it was rather a pale, wistful little face upturned to bid him farewell on the raw November morning when the two children started on their journey in the charge of a servant from the Vicarage. The country was enveloped in a chilly sea-fog, which damped even Nellie's spirits on the drive to Aylsmouth; but they speedily revived as the train bore them through the mist to the inland sunshine, softly gilding ploughed land and stubble, and lighting into burnished splendour the autumnal tints of woodland, not yet denuded of its leaves.

Lilias met them at the station, her fair, bright beauty enhanced by her costly furs, and chatted gaily as they drove towards the Towers. She was evidently very proud of her new house and possessions, and childishly happy in displaying them to her young sister's admiration. Tea was awaiting them in the drawing-room, and soon after their arrival Sir Rawdon came in from an afternoon's shooting. He greeted both girls kindly, but sat down by Lilias, as if he had ears and eyes for no one else; and Winifred secretly acknowledged to herself that Gerald was right. Beyond the requirements of courtesy, Sir Rawdon took no notice of her at all, and seemed wholly engrossed by his wife's anxieties concerning her first dinner-party, to be given at the Towers on the following night. They had been already invited to all the neighbouring houses, and Lilias, after mature deliberation, had decided that a dinner-party would be a less formidable function than a ball in which to make her first appearance in the capacity of hostess.

The two children were soon in touch with the general excitement of the house; and the next day Nellie ran about with important face, carrying messages to the housekeeper,

butler, and head gardener, while Winifred's artistic instincts were brought into requisition in aiding Lilius to arrange the rooms. Lady Daubeny was fairly amazed at the child's taste—the quick eyes which saw in a moment what was needed in colour and effect, and the skilful fingers which supplied the deficiency by whisking the cover off a chair, or filling a vase with red or golden chrysanthemums.

"You are a perfect treasure, Winifred," she said. "I shall always send for you to arrange the rooms in future."

Winifred coloured with pleasure.

"It is so kind of you to let me help," she said, eagerly. "I do like to make things look nice."

In the course of the afternoon she slipped away for a few minutes to her beloved picture gallery, and there Sir Rawdon found her, standing before a fine copy of Prud'homme's picture in the Louvre, "Justice pursuing Crime."

"I am sorry to tear you away," he said, in some amusement; "but my wife declares your assistance indispensable in deciding the relative merits of pink lamp-shades or yellow. What are you studying? Prud'homme! That's an odd picture to take your fancy, child."

"The figures are so fine," said Winifred, dreamily; "and I was thinking—"

She paused.

"What were you thinking?" asked Sir Rawdon, curiously.

"That it is so true. Crime does not see the figure of Justice; but I suppose she always overtakes him in the end."

"On canvas and the stage," returned Sir Rawdon, sarcastically. "Poetic justice has small place in real life, Winifred."

"It seems so," she said; "but I was thinking of some lines I read the other day—

'Though the mills of God grind slowly,
Yet they grind exceeding small.'

One does not often see the end of the play in real life; only bits out of it, like poor Mrs. Vavasour's death——”

“What do you know of Mrs. Vavasour?”

To Winifred's amazement, her companion's fingers closed on her wrist with a grip of iron, and his dark eyes blazed as they looked down into hers.

“Gerald took me to the inn, and I saw the clock,” she answered, scarcely knowing what she said in her terror at the singular change which had passed over Sir Rawdon's face.

By sheer fascination, her eyes steadily met the strange gaze bent upon her, and thus the two stood looking into each other's faces for a minute, that appeared an eternity to Winifred; until Sir Rawdon dropped her arm as suddenly as he had seized it, and turning sharply, walked with quick, hurried steps along the gallery to the door. She heard it close behind him, and then sank trembling on to the nearest seat, burying her face in her hands, as if to shut out the terrible look which seemed seared into her brain. What did it mean? and why did it rouse in her that shuddering fear, greater even than her father's brutality had inspired? She could find no answer to these questions; and it was some minutes before she regained sufficient composure to obey Lady Daubeny's summons.

She did not see Sir Rawdon again until the great event of the day was over, and the gentlemen came into the drawing-room after dinner. Apparently the evening was a success, for everyone seemed in good spirits; and Liliás, with her serene smile and perfect self-possession, moved like a queen amongst her guests, looking so beautiful in her bridal gown, with the Daubeny diamonds encircling her round, white throat, that Winifred could scarcely take her eyes from her face. With a book of photographs which Liliás had given her, she slipped away into a corner, where, unobserved, she could enjoy herself after her own fashion,

watching the novel scene, studying the strange faces, and, by the aid of scraps of conversation which came to her ears, trying to assign character and history to each.

Nellie was in her element, in the happy consciousness of her smart bridesmaid frock, and her new dignity as "Miss Graham," receiving all the attention which her pretty face and position as the bride's sister won for her with delighted complacency and pride. Lilius was too good-natured to order the children off to bed, and they remained until the last of the guests were gone; when Sir Rawdon, entirely ignoring their presence, took his wife in his arms and kissed her.

"You were superb, my Lilius," he said passionately.

"Thank you, dear," answered Lilius, gently disengaging herself; "but please don't crush my gown, it must do duty again. What about the political dinner to-morrow night? You will go, won't you? Lord Edward made such a point of it."

"I would rather not," said Sir Rawdon, his face clouding a little.

"But they want you so much. You must get out of your hermit ways, you know; and I shall have the girls to keep me company. Now do go, just to please me."

"But I should not be home till one or two in the morning. It is an eleven-mile drive."

"Sleep at Kenningborough; Colonel North offered you a bed. It is too far to come back the same night."

"You really wish it, Lilius?"

"Certainly I do," she answered, secretly bent upon displaying her influence over her strong-willed husband. "I want you to take your proper place in the county, Rawdon, and let people see how clever you are, dear."

He smiled, a curiously melancholy smile.

"Then I will go," he said, "to please you, Lilius."

She gave him a gracious smile—Lady Daubeny was not

demonstrative,—and, sending the children to bed, began eagerly criticising the guests of the evening.

Not a word of this little scene was lost on Winifred, and it afforded her considerable food for reflection.

“I wonder Lilius likes to send him away against his will,” she thought; “and how funny she was about her dress. I am sure I would not say a word if Gerald crushed every frock I possessed.”

The next day it rained, a steady, ceaseless downpour; and, weary of roaming the house, Nellie coaxed her sister into playing a game of hide-and-seek through the long galleries in the afternoon. The short winter day was beginning to close in, when Winifred, crouched behind an oak chest in the gallery, heard Sir Rawdon’s voice calling to his wife, as he ascended the staircase from the hall. Lilius came flying to meet him, flushed from the exertion of the game, into which she had entered with a very child’s enjoyment: her hair disarranged, her eyes sparkling.

“I have come to say ‘good-bye.’ You must not let the children tire you, my darling,” he said gently.

“Oh, no. I like some exercise when I can’t get out. Good-bye, Rawdon. I hope you will have a very nice evening. What time shall you be back to-morrow? Perhaps I will walk along the road to meet you, if it is fine.”

“As soon as I can get away; about twelve, I should think. Don’t be alarmed if you hear shots in the park to-night. Some very suspicious characters have been seen about, and the keepers will be on the alert.”

“Ah! the poor poachers,” she said. “I do wish you had let those two off last week. It was quite alarming to hear that man vowing vengeance on you when he was carried away.”

“They all do that; it means nothing. If men choose to break into my grounds and shoot my game, they must take

the consequences. Liliias,"—and he hesitated a moment—“I gave you my word I would go to Kenningborough, and I will if you insist; but the more I think of it, the less I like it. I have a horrible dread that something will happen while I am away.”

Liliias laughed.

“My dear Rawdon, you left me at Dering for more than a week, and nothing happened then.”

“You were in your own home.”

“And I am in my own home now. I promise not to join the poachers, which is the only danger I could possibly fall into. You must go, and make a nice speech, Rawdon. Lord Edward begged me to send you. They will think you are tied to my apron-string if you don’t go. I promise not to get into any mischief while you are away.”

She looked up with a bright smile, evidently amused at his uneasiness; and Sir Rawdon sighed heavily.

“I will go, then. Perhaps it would be folly to give way to a morbid fancy, but I have no peace when you are out of my sight for an instant. Ah! my Liliias, you don’t know how I love you! I would give my life to save you from a moment’s pain!”

He caught her in his arms, straining her to his heart with passionate vehemence, while he kissed her forehead, her cheeks, her lips; then, turning away, he swiftly descended the stairs, looked up to wave his hand to her as he crossed the hall, and passed out at the door. The next moment the sound of wheels on the gravel told that the carriage had driven away.

Winifred came out of her hiding-place as Liliias turned back towards the passage.

“I am very sorry,” she said pleadingly. “I did not hear Sir Rawdon coming in time to go; and I did not like to come out while he was here.”

"It is of no consequence," said Lilius, with her usual untroubled smile. "We did not talk secrets; and Rawdon is always kissing me before everybody. I wish he would have a little more consideration for my clothes. Come along; we must find Nellie."

Lady Daubeny seemed determined for one evening to cast off the trammels of her matronly dignity. She vied with Nellie in suggesting amusements, from *La Grace* in the hall, to making toffee over Mrs. Bunser's fire. She dispensed with dinner, and shared the children's tea; and then persuaded the housekeeper to tell them stories by firelight, until Nellie was discovered fast asleep on the rug, with her head in her sister's lap. The bride's sunny smile and pleasant manners had already endeared her to the old servants; and Mrs. Bunser bade her "good-night" with quite motherly tenderness, as, saying she was sleepy, Lilius went off to bed at half-past nine with the children.

About half an hour later she knocked at Winifred's door, and receiving no answer, entered the room, to discover the little girl almost hidden behind the curtains of the window.

"Not in bed yet?" she said. "Why, child, what are you doing there?"

"It is so curious," said Winifred, eagerly. "There is a thick white fog down the valley, reaching up to the foot of the house; and the moon shining on it makes it look just like the sea."

"Then the rain has cleared off, I suppose. It does look odd;" and Lilius stood for a moment watching the waves of mist rolling beneath her in the light of the clear, bright moon. "It is very cold," she said, with a shiver, returning to the fire. "Winifred, you must really get into bed. You will catch your death standing there."

Somewhat reluctantly the child quitted the window, and came towards the fire, where Lady Daubeny was standing in

a pale blue-dressing-gown, her long golden hair falling over her shoulders.

"Oh, how lovely you look!" cried Winifred, involuntarily; and Lilius laughed.

"You are as bad as Rawdon, child. This costume always fetches him, and he sits staring at me till it is quite uncomfortable. Will you tell me the time? I am going to wind my watch up to-night."

Winifred was delighted to produce her treasure.

"It may be a minute fast," she said, holding it out for her companion's inspection. "Gerald says he has not quite regulated it yet. Did you forget to wind yours last night?"

"No, I did not forget," said Lilius, turning the hands of her watch. "You must never speak of it before Sir Rawdon, Winifred, he does not like anyone to notice it, but he cannot bear the sound of ticking. It seems to jar on his nerves like a squeaking wheel; and he has such ears, he hears it everywhere. He gave me no peace till I left off wearing my watch. I told him I should be always keeping him and everyone else waiting if I did not know the time, but he said he did not care; and he never does."

"But that must be very inconvenient."

"Extremely; but it is his whim, and I am getting quite used to it now. When we are dining out he can never stand a clock in other people's houses for very long at a time, though he does put cotton-wool in his ears. However, I will have my dear little watch to keep me company to-night. Good-night, Winifred; why, how grave you look!"

"Won't you have Nellie or me to sleep with you?" said Winifred, timidly. "A watch is no company, Lilius."

"It is very good company, I think. Are you frightened at sleeping alone?"

"No; but I was thinking of what Sir Rawdon said about you."

"You little nervous puss!" Lilius bent to kiss the child, her golden curls mingling as she stooped with Winifred's dark locks. "You and Rawdon are a fine pair. I am thankful I am not blessed with nerves. I shall sleep like a top to-night. I can hardly keep my eyes open now; but I like to know the time when I wake in the morning. Good-night, and pleasant dreams to you, child."

With a bright smile she swept out of the room, leaving Winifred looking after her with troubled eyes.

"I wish she had not talked about the watch keeping her company," she murmured to herself. "It was just what poor Mrs. Vavasour said about that horrible clock."

In the meantime Sir Rawdon, in the Town-hall at Kenningborough, was manfully performing his duties: eating his dinner, conversing with his neighbours, and finally delivering a speech in which all his powers of sarcasm were brought to bear upon the opposite party. The assembly broke up sooner than he had expected, and coming out into the street, the strange uneasiness which had been growing upon him all the evening seemed to culminate in an irresistible impulse, urging him to return home at once. He had the latch-key of a side-door in his pocket, so would have no difficulty in entering the house, which he would probably reach about half-past twelve. Excusing himself as best he might to his friend, he got into his carriage, which was in waiting to convey him to Colonel North's house, and gave his orders to the coachman to drive to the Towers. They had scarcely left the town behind, when they found themselves enveloped in a thick blinding fog, and the footman left the box to ask if his master still wished to proceed. Sir Rawdon got out into the road.

"It will be all right if you go slowly, Beale," he said. "You can't miss the road. Put out the lamps, they are only confusing in a fog."

He re-entered the carriage, which drove on at a steady

trot; and Sir Rawdon sank back on his seat with a sigh of relief. Nearly an hour went by, and he was almost dozing, when suddenly he became conscious of unusual jars and jerks, as the wheels appeared to be jolting through deep, uneven ruts. He pulled the check-string, and the carriage stopped. The fog was more dense than ever, and curiously bewildering from the faint light shimmering through it from the obscured moonbeams. The moment Sir Rawdon's feet touched the ground, he made one discovery.

"You are off the road, Beale," he said. "This is nothing but a cart-track. Have you any idea where we are?"

"We should be somewhere on Chesney Common, Sir Rawdon."

"And we are," said the baronet, perceiving a furze-bush beside the track. "Turn the horses, Beale; and I will walk in front. We can't be far off the road."

He walked back, following the ruts, the carriage moving slowly behind him; until, to his dismay, the track divided into two equally broad and rutty ways, neither of which could be the lost highroad. The coachman had no notion by which they had come, and Sir Rawdon chose one at a venture; but a short distance further it forked again, and he was obliged to confess that they were hopelessly astray.

"Let me drive slowly on over the turf, Sir Rawdon," suggested the coachman; "we must come to the end of the common at last."

"You can't drive straight with nothing to guide you, Beale. Give the horses their heads; they ought to know the direction of their stables."

Disregarding the coachman's remonstrances, he mounted the box, took the whip and reins in his own hands, and bidding the footman get inside, started the horses at a trot.

"Have a care, Sir Rawdon, or we shall be over!" ex-

claimed the coachman in dismay, as the carriage bumped and swayed over the uneven ground; and Sir Rawdon so far heeded the caution that he slightly moderated the speed.

Leaning forwards with anxious eyes, which vainly sought to penetrate the pall of mist which hemmed them in, he held the reins loosely, suffering the horses to take their course unchecked. Wheels and springs might suffer; indeed, Sir Rawdon was in a mood to care little what befell servants or horses, so long as he reached the Towers without undue delay. For a time the horses kept the track, then they swerved and broke into a canter on finding the turf beneath their feet.

“For heaven’s sake, Sir Rawdon, pull them in! You ’ll break their legs and our necks!” cried the coachman, aghast at his master’s recklessness; but on went the horses, and Sir Rawdon sat as if he had not heard.

A minute later there was a shock, a plunge; the near horse had put his foot into a rabbit-hole, and pitched violently forward on his head. He was on his legs again in a moment, for Sir Rawdon was no novice with the reins; but the pair were thoroughly frightened by the accident, and tore away in a mad gallop, which it was some moments before Sir Rawdon could check. He pulled them back at last into a walk, and looked round in triumph at the coachman.

“You see, Beale, I was right; we are on the road,” he said quietly.

And the coachman would have been more than human if he had not answered, with also a ring of triumph in his tone:

“Yes, Sir Rawdon; and I see the near horse is dead lame.”

“Nonsense!” returned Sir Rawdon sharply; and he urged the horses into a trot, which served, much against his will, to convince him of the truth of the coachman’s statement. It

was evidently impossible the horse could advance at anything faster than a walk; but at least they were on a road, and, if the animals' instincts were to be trusted, presumably heading in the right direction for the Towers. Proceeding at a walk, Sir Rawdon revolved the situation in his mind, and had come to the conclusion to leave the coachman to follow with the lame horse, and drive on himself with the sound one, when a dark building suddenly loomed before them out of the fog, and the horses stopped of their own accord.

"Bless my soul, if this isn't a providence!" ejaculated the coachman fervently. "It's 'The Duke's Head,' Sir Rawdon."

"*What!*" exclaimed the baronet, in a tone that made the coachman stare.

"'The Duke's Head Inn,' on Chesney Common, Sir Rawdon. It's a mercy we stumbled on it; we might have spent the whole night wandering round and round on that common." And the coachman, who was already on the ground, struck a thundering assault on the door.

"What are you doing, you fool?" cried Sir Rawdon angrily, when he could make his voice heard above the uproar. "I am not going to stop here."

"Not—stop—here!"

The coachman brought out each word with a gasp of amazement and consternation.

"Certainly not! Stop in a miserable inn, when I am only six miles from home? Not exactly!" and Sir Rawdon laughed, a sharp, mirthless laugh.

"Very sorry, Sir Rawdon; but I couldn't attempt to drive you over this common unless the fog lifts," said the coachman decidedly. "It's more than a man's life is worth, let alone his place."

"And who asked you to drive me, idiot? You can stop here with the lame horse, and I shall take on the other."

"Indeed, sir, if you take my advice, you will do no such thing," said a shrill female voice, and the landlady appeared at the door, candle in hand, muffled in shawls, with her husband slinking meekly behind her. "It's as bad a fog as we ever see, and you might as well try to walk through Kenningborough streets blindfold as keep a straight track across the common to-night."

"Much obliged for your advice, my good woman, but I am going to do it," said Sir Rawdon drily. "Take out the near horse, Beale."

"Your master is mad. Who is he?" whispered the landlady to the footman, as he stood near her in the doorway.

"Sir Rawdon Daubeny. Mad as an 'atter; it's no use talking to him," responded the footman, in the same low tone.

But the coachman, an old family servant, who had known Sir Rawdon from a boy, would not let him depart without another remonstrance.

"It's past midnight, Sir Rawdon," he said; "and if so be as you do keep the road over the common, you will be full an hour getting to the Towers, and will be nigh froze to death; for you ain't used to the open hair at night, and in this fog it feels uncommon like a vault. Rheumatic fever and chills is easier caught than got rid of, as I can assure you; and them fogs are wonderful bad for breeding 'em."

"Perhaps you are right," said Sir Rawdon slowly, like a man convinced against his will. "Well, Beale, I will stop here to-night. I suppose I can have a bed?"

"That you can," said the landlady. "I had got a room all ready for a gentleman that was coming out of Kenningborough, but has been stopped by the fog; so I can show you to it at once, sir. This way, if you please. Now, Rudd," turning sharply on her husband, "why ar'n't you helping with the horses?"

Preceded by the landlady, and followed by the footman carrying his Gladstone bag, Sir Rawdon was escorted through the first parlour into the room beyond, looking on the garden. It was in darkness, with the shutters closed and barred, and the landlady was passing on towards the staircase, when she paused and looked back at her visitor.

"Will you please to take anything?" she was beginning, when, startled by the strange pallor of his face, which looked ghastly white against his black hair and beard, she broke off to exclaim: "Bless me, sir! are you ill?"

Sir Rawdon was silent for a moment, gazing straight before him, apparently at the old clock, his eyes dilated and shining with a strange, scintillating light. Then mastering himself by a visible effort he lowered his gaze, and turned to the landlady, resting his hand on the table.

"Did you speak?" he said.

"I asked if you would take anything, sir."

"No, thank you. The air of this room seems close; have you not another you can give me?"

"The bedroom is overhead, sir, and is the only one we have ready: there has been a fire in it to-day."

"Show it me."

The landlady mounted the staircase, candle in hand; but Sir Rawdon remained motionless, leaning on the table, until his quick ear caught an impatient movement in the rear, which served to remind him of the footman's presence. With hasty unsteady steps he hurried forward, but reeled as he reached the foot of the stairs, and would have fallen if the footman had not caught his arm.

"Confound the woman! why does she go so fast?" he exclaimed testily. "What did I catch my foot in, Charles —a nail on the carpet? Who ever saw such stairs? they are like a ship's ladder!"

Reaching the top, a comfortable bedroom was revealed, of

which Sir Rawdon was gracious enough to signify his approval. He bade the landlady good-night, and flung himself into an arm-chair, while the footman unpacked and laid out the contents of the bag.

"You can go now, Charles," he said quietly. "Bring my hot water at eight, and tell Beale I shall want the carriage at nine. If necessary, he must send to Kenningborough for horses."

"Yes, Sir Rawdon;" and taking the bedroom candle-stick which the landlady had left for his use, the footman left the room, shutting the door behind him. At the foot of the stairs he paused, and looked curiously about with the candle for any rent or nail which might have caused his master's stumble, but nothing was to be seen.

"It is my belief Sir Rawdon's drunk," he muttered to himself. "No man in his senses would have started from Kenningborough in that fog, or let the horses canter when he couldn't see an inch before his nose. He is uncommon sharp at hiding it, but I'm blest if he's not had a drop too much at that 'ere dinner, which was why he wouldn't go to the Colonel's house."

And having thus solved, to his entire satisfaction, the mystery of his master's behaviour, the footman proceeded to the bar to fortify himself against any ill effects of the night air by a glass of hot spirits and water.

CHAPTER XI.

The Falling of the Curse.



T was doubtless the result of her conversation with Liliás, and her recollections of the old clock at "The Duke's Head," but Winifred's sleep that night was broken by a succession of horrible dreams. She was on the shore at Beech-haven sketching the portrait of Liliás. Was it the coming storm which made the light fade so rapidly that she could scarcely discern the girl's beautiful features? Then a fearful flash of lightning rent the heavens, and a ship sailed into the bay: pale blue fire was flickering on masts and yards, and on the strange figure of the captain; and when he turned, he showed the face of the "Duke's Head" clock. She tried to cry out and warn Liliás of the danger, but she was powerless to speak or move; the dreaded figure drew nearer and nearer, and Liliás smiled and stretched out her arms towards it.

There was a flash, a shock as of the ground being rent asunder,—and the scene was changed. Winifred was in the *Petrel* by Gerald's side, flying over a stormy sea. His face was grave and anxious, and he kept looking back over his shoulder as if he feared pursuit. Suddenly, swiftly approaching in a line to intercept their course, not from behind, but from the side, she saw the spectre ship. Gerald, however, did not see it; he was still looking behind him, and the ship drew nearer and nearer, and again Winifred was bereft of power to speak or move. Another moment, and smoothly, cleanly as a knife the bows of the terrible ship cut through the *Petrel's* side, and Gerald leaped up to catch the

girl in his arms; but even as he touched her, a hand came between, and with a sound in her ears which was either fiendish laughter or the tick-tick of the clock, she felt herself lifted on to the deck of the ship. Ship! It was no ship, but the stage of her father's theatre, and she was taking part in a play which she knew in a moment was *Othello*, for she had once acted as Desdemona's page. Now she was Desdemona herself, and with terror she perceived that the face of Othello was that of Sir Rawdon, while his back, which he never turned to the audience, bore the frame and face of the old clock at the inn.

The girl's limbs seemed frozen with horror, yet some inward power compelled her to move and speak only the words assigned her. She saw Gerald in the audience, the Grahams, and all her Beechhaven friends; and they smiled and applauded, and cast bouquets at her feet. They could not see the terrible figure moving at her side, which appalled her more than a spectre from the tomb. Her friends thought it acting, but Winifred knew it was deadly earnest, and that when the fatal moment came, she would be murdered by that grinning face in their very sight, while they applauded her death agonies as a fine piece of acting. In vain she struggled to escape the spell which was upon her. She could neither fly, nor cry out for help. She was Desdemona in very truth, hemmed in by relentless fate, and walking with open eyes towards a doom which she could in nowise escape. The curtain rose upon the bed-chamber scene, and, mechanically as before, the words of her part fell from the girl's lips, but she knew full well that she was pleading for her life to no jealous lover, but to a monster with neither heart nor pity.

The fatal pillow approached her lips, and Winifred's agony found vent in one wild scream, which rang in her ears as she woke and started up in bed. Good heavens! was it all a

dream? The scenes through which she had passed had been so real, so vivid, that not until she had found the matches, and with trembling fingers struck a light, could the child convince herself that she was indeed alone in her bedroom at the Towers. Her heart was beating violently, and she was shivering all over with fright; but yes, it must have been a dream, for the dreaded figure, of which she could recall every look and line, had vanished with her waking. Yet the echoes of that terrible cry were still ringing in her ears. Surely it was not part of her dream? Had it escaped from her own lips, or was it some noise in the house which had mingled with her dream, and thus awakened her?

"I am quite sure it was a real sound," Winifred decided, "and I don't believe I made it. I remember once dreaming that I screamed, and mother told me I had not made a sound. If it was really what it seemed to me, it was a cry like someone being murdered. I must go and find out."

She got up, threw on her dressing-gown, and paused to look at her watch. It was nearly four o'clock, and she felt relieved to discover that so much of the night was over. Softly opening the door, she slipped into the passage and listened at Nellie's door, which was close beside her own. Not a sound came to her ears, and opening it noiselessly she looked into the room. The child lay sleeping peacefully. Winifred could hear her regular breathing, and stole away on tiptoe that she might not waken her. Lady Daubeny's room was at the further end of the same passage; absolute stillness reigned within, and after a moment's hesitation Winifred ventured to gently turn the handle. It yielded, and she stepped into the room, but afraid of startling its occupant, she paused by the door, shading her candle with her hand.

"Lilias," she said in a low voice,—“Lilias.”

There was no answer, and raising the light she looked

across the large room to the bed. She caught a glimpse of Lady Daubeny's golden head resting on the pillow, when there came a sudden draught of air and blew out her candle.

"It feels almost as if the window were open," thought Winifred, with a shiver: "how cold the room is! Well, Lilius is asleep, that is certain, so the cry must have been my fancy. I am glad I did not wake her;" and feeling for the door, she closed it softly behind her, and groped her way back to her own room.

Asleep—yes, Lilius Daubeny was indeed asleep. A sleep from which no voice of love nor fear could waken her—a sleep from which her blue eyes would never open on this side of the grave. Beautiful as chiselled marble, her face rested on the pillow, peaceful as a sleeping child's; but no breath came from the parted lips, and the fingers of the arm resting outside the coverlet were unnaturally stiff and clenched. Colder and colder grew the room as the night wore on to dawn. A patter of rain came on the windows, and the wind woke, sighing with a low wail through the almost leafless woods, and moaning round the house like a human soul in pain. The day broke red and lowering through the heavy clouds, a robin sang in the garden, and sounds of human life began to wake in the sleeping house. And still that silent form lay alone in its awful stillness, and a smile—changeless, immortal—seemed to rest on those parted lips. Human aid was powerless, for the angel of death had entered in the solemn hush of the night; and human love, thrown back upon itself, could only stab the living.

There was grief and horror in Lynscombe Towers when the truth was known, and the silence of the death chamber was broken by hurrying feet, hushed voices, and bitter sobs. Messengers came and went, the doctor's carriage stopped before the house, and five minutes later a man on horseback

was galloping through the park on his way to the nearest police-station. The servants stood about in groups, talking in low awestruck whispers; several of the maids were crying, and, clasped in Mrs. Bunser's motherly arms, poor little Nellie was sobbing her heart out under the dread bewildering agony of the first sorrow which had touched her bright young life.

Winifred stood near them, looking out of the window with eyes that saw only a great dark room faintly lighted by the glimmer of a candle from the doorway, and the glint of golden hair on the pillow of the bed. She could still feel the chill of the cold, and the oppression from the terrible silence which reigned in the chamber of death. The shock of the news seemed to have frozen her to stone; she almost envied Nellie her power of weeping. The cry which had awakened her still rang in her ears, and its horror seemed to weigh like lead upon her heart. How, and in what manner, had Lilius died?

The same question was being whispered through the house. The doctor had locked the door, and forbidden all ingress to the room, while with grave and troubled face he paced slowly up and down the outside passage. And in the midst of his watch, a carriage was seen approaching at a canter through the park, and its master stepped over the threshold of the house of woe and mourning. The messenger had met him on the road, and his face was ashy grey and haggard, while the servants shrank before the wild anguish of his eyes, as without a word he passed them by, and mounted the stairs, walking with the bent head and tottering gait of an old man towards his wife's chamber.

The doctor met him as he approached; but Sir Rawdon, without manifesting the slightest consciousness of the other's presence, laid his hand upon the door.

"It is locked," said the doctor, "and I have the key."

Believe me, Sir Rawdon, I am distressed indeed to intrude upon your grief, but the matter is urgent. Can you listen to what I have to tell you?"

Yet even the doctor, inured to sights of suffering, was appalled by the heartrending misery in the dark eyes turned upon him.

"Let me see her first," said Sir Rawdon, hoarsely. "I must go in alone. Then you shall do with me as you please."

The doctor yielded; he opened the door, and shut it again when Sir Rawdon had passed in. Then he resumed his steady walk up and down the passage. Five minutes, ten, fifteen went by, and still the door remained fast closed. The doctor looked at his watch; any moment the police might arrive, and the master of the house was still ignorant of the terrible truth! He opened the door, and quietly entered the room. Sir Rawdon was on his knees by the bedside, his lips pressed to the rigid white hand which lay upon the coverlet, his whole frame shaking with fierce uncontrollable sobs; but he heard the advancing footsteps, and, mastering himself by a mighty effort, rose with averted face, and stood grasping the posts of the bed.

"What have you to say to me?" he asked in the same hoarse tone, his face still hidden from the doctor's sight.

"I have to inform you, Sir Rawdon, of the cause of Lady Daubeny's death."

"I am listening."

"She died from no natural cause. It is a horrible thing, but I can't spare you the knowledge. She has been murdered in her sleep."

A groan burst from Sir Rawdon's lips.

"Strangled," said the doctor. "There are the finger-marks on her throat."

He turned down the clothes, and pointed to some livid bruises on the smooth fair skin.

Sir Rawdon shuddered from head to foot. Supporting himself by the posts, he looked down upon the ghastly sight, and still the doctor could not see his face.

"I can give you one piece of comfort; she was clearly killed in her sleep," said the doctor earnestly. "There is no sign of a struggle; her murderer was swift and sure. She can hardly have felt any pain: look at her face—it is as calm as a sleeping child."

There was a sob choked and stifled, and then Sir Rawdon turned upon the doctor like a man possessed, his face working, his eyes ablaze with passion.

"Who did it?" he exclaimed fiercely. "By heaven! if I suspected any man of the deed, I would dog his steps like a shadow, and never rest till I had exacted vengeance an hundredfold for every hair of my darling's head. Justice of the Law! Can the Law give her back to me? I tell you hanging would be mercy to the wretch who murdered her!"

A fierce thirst for revenge appeared to have superseded the first prostration of his grief. With head erect, and burning eyes, he turned to examine the room, while the doctor pointed out to him the open window, and the crushed yellow leaves and broken twigs of the climbing wisteria, which, with its knotty stem supported by a thick wire trellis, wreathed the wall from ground to window, forming a natural ladder, by which the murderer had evidently come and gone. The print of a man's foot could be traced in the mould of the flower border beneath the window, but there the clue seemed to end. Nothing was missing from the room, and the police were of opinion that the man had been startled in his intended robbery by some noise in the house; for Lady Daubeny's watch was found shattered on the gravel-path a short distance from the window, as if dropped by her murderer in his flight.

The doctor had telegraphed to Kenningborough for the Superintendent of Police, who arrived in the course of the morning, and having examined the position of the rooms, insisted on interrogating the two children, to whose ears alone it was possible that sounds from Lady Daubeny's room might have penetrated ; the servants' rooms being all situated in a distant wing.

Nellie replied, with a burst of tears, that she had slept soundly through the night, and heard nothing ; and the Superintendent turned to Winifred.

"I am almost certain I heard a cry," she said. "I heard it in my dream as I woke, but I felt so sure it was a real sound that I got up and went along the passage to see."

"What time was this?" The Superintendent took out his note-book, and looked critically at the child's pale face.

"It was seven minutes to four when I looked at my watch. I think I must have heard the cry perhaps three or four minutes before."

The doctor made a movement as if to speak, but drew back again, and Winifred continued in a low tone :

"I went to Nellie's room, and found her asleep. Then I went to—to—"

"To Lady Daubeny's?" asked the officer, as the child evidently shrank from pronouncing the name.

"Yes ; I listened and it was all still. I opened the door and called her very softly, but there was no answer ; so I held up my candle, and saw—"

"What did you see?" asked the man eagerly, as Winifred stopped, gazing with startled looks at Sir Rawdon, whose dark eyes were fixed upon her face.

"Yes, what did you see?" repeated the baronet in his deep muffled tones, advancing a step towards the child.

"Nothing," she murmured, recoiling at his approach. "I

mean I just saw her head lying on the pillow, when my candle blew out. There was such a draught, and the room was so cold, it felt as if the window were open."

"What did you do?"

"I shut the door and went back to my room."

"In the dark?"

"It was not quite dark, there was a little light from the moon. It was just setting; I could see it from my window—the fog had all cleared away."

"And you heard nothing more?"

"No, nothing."

"When did you last see Lady Daubeny?"

"In my room," said Winifred, and she repeated, as accurately as she could remember it, the conversation which had passed between herself and the dead girl.

"Why did you offer to sleep with her?"

"I was frightened," said Winifred uneasily, far too much in awe of Sir Rawdon to let him know that she had overheard his presentiments of evil. "She said something about poachers, and—I did not know what they might do."

She coloured as she spoke, and had Gerald been present he would have seen she was keeping something back, but the Superintendent merely thought that the child was ashamed of confessing her nervous fears, and passed on to another point.

"Lady Daubeny had already dismissed her maid, so you were the last person to see her alive?"

"Except her murderer," put in Sir Rawdon in so fierce a tone that the man looked at him in surprise. "Do not waste time in asking useless questions," continued the baronet almost savagely. "Have the bills printed at once. I offer £1000 for the murderer's apprehension."

He turned and left the room, beckoning the doctor to follow him.

"I can't stand any more of this," he said, pressing his hand to his forehead. "I must be alone. Will you have the goodness to give any necessary orders for me? Mr. Graham and my nephew ought to be here this afternoon."

And as the doctor, with ready sympathy, promised to comply with the request, Sir Rawdon hurriedly thanked him, and retiring to his study, turned the key in the lock. He was not seen again until the evening, after the arrival of Mr. Graham and Gerald, when having left to the doctor the task of communicating to them the terrible details of Lady Daubeny's death, he entered the room where they were sitting, with bowed head and weary dragging steps. The vicar rose without speaking and grasped the widower's hand; his heart was too full for words, but Sir Rawdon broke the silence in a harsh constrained tone.

"Graham, you have come to call me to account. They have told you in what manner I have guarded the treasure you committed to my care. A life for a life! If my death could bring her back, you would not find me here; and her—oh, God!"

"Heaven forbid," said the vicar hastily, as Sir Rawdon's bitter speech ended in a half-stifled moan. "Why should I blame you, Daubeny? We are both suffering under the same terrible blow; and of the two, your loss is even greater than my own."

"You are right," returned Sir Rawdon hoarsely. "You have your wife, and other children; but she was my all, an angel who had stooped from heaven to have pity on my lonely life. I ought not to have left her, though it was at her own wish. If I had only slept last night in the house——" He broke off as a shudder ran through his frame, and he added fiercely: "Ah! it is hellish, hellish, the cruelty which has torn her from me!"

He began to pace hurriedly up and down the room, apparently unconscious of the presence of his nephew, who

had risen on his entrance, and again retired silently to his seat in the darkest corner of the room.

"I cannot understand how a man could have found the heart to do it," said the vicar brokenly. "My darling child, who never harboured an uncharitable thought, or did an unkindly action in her life:—yet it was God's will; and though she is taken from earth, I know the Love which gave her life is enfolding her still."

"*Love!*" And Sir Rawdon paused in front of the clergyman, an expression of passionate hate and defiance on his handsome features. "Are you mad, Graham? *Love*, to strike her down in her white innocence and beauty, without warning, without mercy, by a death which we shrink from inflicting on the vilest, the most brutal murderer! *Love*, to bereave you of your child, and to hurl me at one blow from Paradise into a bottomless abyss of agony and despair! If I believed there were a Being responsible for this deed, I would——"

He broke off and passed his hand across his eyes.

"I am raving like a woman," he said. "Forgive me, Graham, I hardly know what I am saying. Tell me, have you seen the Superintendent? Ah, Gerald, you are there; it was good of you to come. I am in no condition to attend to all these sickening details. You will give the orders, and arrange everything as you please. All heart and energy have gone from me; I only ask to be left alone."

Sir Rawdon sank as if exhausted into a chair, and a few minutes later made some excuse for leaving the room.

His moods varied little during the days which followed. He was either spiritless and prostrated with grief, or roused to wild passion, declaiming so fiercely against the cruelty of the blow which had fallen upon him, that the vicar was shocked and horrified, and, with all his kindness, somewhat contemptuous of the excitable nature which made no attempt to bear the trouble like a man.

Mr. Graham's liking and respect for Gerald Daubeny were largely increased during those sad painful days. His quiet good sense, consideration, and patience, were in strong contrast to his uncle's lack of self-control and nervous irritability, and the grave sternness of his face, and unusual silence, the vicar naturally attributed to the young man's tact and sympathy in the terrible trouble which had fallen upon his friends. He little guessed what passionate grief was hidden under that quiet exterior, and the sharp anguish, borne without a word of complaint, which caused the unnatural brilliancy of those brave grey eyes, or what tortures Gerald underwent during his interviews with the police, in making arrangements for the inquest and funeral, and in attending to all the letter-writing and details, which Sir Rawdon left entirely to his nephew.

Gerald's powers of endurance were tested to the uttermost in that house of mourning, and the one relief he found from the tension of the strain was the company of his adopted sister. The child never betrayed her knowledge of his secret, but overcoming her natural shrinking from the subject, she would talk to him in her soft low voice of the three first days of her visit to the Towers, of Liliás in her bright sunny happiness, so evidently unshadowed by a cloud, and Gerald, sickened by the endless repetition of the horrible details of the death of the woman he loved, grew soothed and comforted by the knowledge that her life had been, in very deed, untroubled to its close. He would take Winifred on his knees in some quiet corner by the fire in the great hall, or in the gallery above, when he could escape for the moment from his numerous duties, and leaning back in his chair with closed eyes, give himself up to the restfulness of listening to the child's soft voice, and the caressing touch of her little fingers stroking back the hair from his aching brow.

The police, stimulated by Sir Rawdon's offered reward, were indefatigable in hunting up clues and making arrests; but the accused persons invariably succeeded in clearing themselves by proving an *alibi*, and no further information had been obtained before the inquest was held, when the evidence adduced appeared so be decidedly conflicting. The detectives inclined to the opinion that the murderer was a mere commonplace burglar, who, aware of Sir Rawdon's absence from home, had effected his entrance for the purpose of stealing Lady Daubeny's jewellery. He would have found no difficulty in throwing up the window, as Lady Daubeny was in the habit of sleeping with it slightly open at the top. She had probably awakened on his entrance, and he had throttled her to prevent her giving the alarm. The sound of the child's approach had frightened him into abandoning the robbery, and he had escaped as he came, carrying away the only article he had had time to secure, Lady Daubeny's watch, which he had afterwards dropped in his flight. If the murder, they argued, were a cold-blooded scheme of vengeance, planned and carried out by some secret enemy of Sir Rawdon's without thought of booty, how came the victim's watch to have been stolen and dropped in the garden? Opposed to the former theory, however, were two irreconcilable facts; viz., that Winifred adhered steadily to the statement that it was seven minutes to four when she got up and looked at her watch, while Lady Daubeny's watch was found to have stopped at two minutes after three. The detectives affirmed that the child had made a mistake, especially as the doctor gave it as his opinion that the murder had been committed at the earlier hour. The doctor also opined that as there were no signs of a struggle, and the pillow under Lady Daubeny's head had not even been disarranged, she must have been murdered in her sleep, and would have had no time to utter

a cry which could have reached to Winifred's ears. The child, however, steadily maintained that she had been awakened by an actual cry, and there the matter ended; the facts seeming irreconcilable.

Winifred had her own theory about the murder, which she kept carefully to herself. With a vivid recollection of Sir Rawdon's solemn warning to Lilius in the bay, and of his strange presentiment on the afternoon before the murder, she was firmly convinced that his young wife's death had been wrought by no mortal hand. He had avowed that he was under a curse, which struck not at himself, but at the object of his love; the doom had fallen, and Lilius was dead. It was clear as daylight to Winifred. No wonder, she thought, that the police had failed to catch the murderer, but she did not dare to confide her belief to Gerald; for she had a wholesome dread of bringing the stern look into his face by any allusion to her superstitious fancies, and fear of Sir Rawdon. That undefinable fear had now deepened to a terror, which she could scarcely keep under control. She had heard that Sir Rawdon had spent the night at "The Duke's Head Inn"; and, impelled by a fearful curiosity, she had ascertained from the footman that his master had occupied the room above the clock, in which the man had found him so fast asleep in the morning that he had considerable difficulty in rousing him—Sir Rawdon, indeed, having only left his room to enter the carriage and drive away. Every night she was haunted by terrible dreams of Sir Rawdon and the "Duke's Head" clock, for the two seemed inextricably jumbled in her sleep; or she would lie awake for hours picturing the scene of Lilius' death, as painted by her strong imagination, until the bed shook beneath her trembling, and she was obliged to hide her head under the clothes to stifle the cry of terror that rose to her lips. Not for an instant would she remain alone in his company, and, indeed, only supported his dreaded presence

with equanimity when she could shelter herself behind Gerald's broad shoulders from the glance of his deep dark eyes. These nightly terrors, and the constant apprehension of meeting him by day, began to tell upon her strength; and it was no less a relief to Winifred than to Gerald when the day came for their return to Beechhaven Cottage.

The funeral had taken place the day before, the remains of the murdered girl being laid in the Daubeny vault with the pomp and ceremony which was deemed fitting to the occasion, and followed by a train of mourners and carriages from half the great houses in the county. Sir Rawdon had borne himself with more self-restraint than he had exhibited to his own household, his quiet dignity and the weary sadness of his expression commanding universal sympathy and respect. Lynscombe Towers was again to be closed, and deserted by all but the old servants of the family, while Sir Rawdon sailed southwards in his yacht, his one desire seeming to place the length of the globe between himself and the scene of his short-lived happiness.

"And I hope I shall never go to the Towers, or away from the Cottage again," said Winifred, nestling up to her companion, as they entered the dogcart which was awaiting them on their return at Aylsmouth Station. "Oh, Gerald, isn't it nice to be at home? I do think Beechhaven is the loveliest place in the world!"

"May you always think so, little one," was Gerald's reply, as he wrapped a fur cloak round the child, and tucked the rug over her kness. "It is likely to be my home for many years to come, and what should I do without my little sister?"

"I shall never change," said Winifred confidently. "I suppose I shall have to grow up; I would much rather stay as I am. But that won't make any difference, will it, Gerald?"

"Not a bit," he answered with decision; and Winifred gave him a smile of perfect contentment as they drove away.

CHAPTER XII.

That Little Beechhaven Girl.

IME and tide wait for no man; and in spite of Winifred's wishes, she proved no exception to the rule, yet, but that she grew taller and stronger, and, in the eyes at least of her adopted brother, prettier every day, the flight of the months passed lightly over the inmates of Beechhaven Cottage, and no violent convulsion or upheaval of landmarks took place to remind them how fast the years went by. Life at the Cottage flowed on smooth and tranquil as a river through the plains; and under the beneficent influence of love and sunshine, Winifred developed in a fashion that surprised Mrs. Daubeny. She could scarcely believe sometimes—looking at the girl's bright expressive face, the brown eyes sparkling with fun and harmless mischief, the light lithesome figure which went dancing over the house as if upborne by invisible wings—that Winifred could be the same pale, timid child, with all life and joy crushed out of her, whom Gerald had brought home to the Cottage that memorable September evening. No more was ever said about her going to school. Mrs. Daubeny would have been grieved, indeed, to part with her; for little by little the "caravan child" had won her way into the heart of Gerald's mother, where she now occupied a place second only to Gerald himself.

By an arrangement with Mrs. Graham, Winifred, escorted by Grim, walked over every morning to Dering Vicarage, to share Nellie's lessons with her governess; but as the girl grew older, and her artistic talents became more and more apparent, she was allowed to drive into Aylsmouth with

Gerald every Saturday morning to attend classes at the School of Art, returning with him early in the afternoon. Passionately devoted to drawing for its own sake, Winifred, finding how easily she outstripped all other pupils of her age, began to indulge in innocent dreams of ambition. Perhaps in time she might make a picture good enough to sell. How delightful it would be to have money she had earned to buy presents for Mrs. Daubeny and Gerald! She might even, when she was quite grown up, become a great painter, and gain sufficient sums by the sale of her pictures to set Gerald free from his hated drudgery at the bank. From the moment when this brilliant idea dawned upon Winifred's mind, she laboured with an energy and zeal which made Mrs. Daubeny tremble for the girl's health, and call in Gerald's authority to forbid the young artist from rising at untimely hours in the morning to pursue her self-imposed tasks. Winifred pleaded earnestly that drawing was not work—it could not hurt her to do it; but Gerald informed her, with his usual decision, that he preferred the roses in her cheeks to roses on her canvas; and furthermore remarked, with a twinkle in his eye, that he would rather the house were unadorned than see faded flowers in all the rooms, and that he should really have to request the servants to attend to his shirts and socks in future, as no buttons remained upon the one nor heels upon the other. This was Winifred's special department, and she coloured to the roots of her hair.

"I have been like the dog in the fable, dropping the meat to catch the shadow," she decided; and although she still secretly cherished her ambition, Gerald never again had cause to complain of her neglect of her household duties.

The young man's position at the bank remained unaltered: the senior partner did not seem inclined to retire, and Sir Rawdon made no attempt to exert further influence on his nephew's behalf. He never returned to England, nor kept

up any correspondence with his English friends, with the exception of a brief business letter, which in the course of one or two years would reach Gerald, dated from an Asiatic or African port, begging him to see after some matter connected with the Lynscombe house and property. The wanderings of the *Silence* were occasionally reported in the daily papers, but nothing further was known to his relatives of its master's life and doings. The mystery enshrouding Lady Daubeny's death only deepened as the years rolled on, and the most sanguine had to abandon all hope of the murderer being brought to justice.

It was an afternoon in March, more than five years after the terrible tragedy at the Towers, when a merry party was gathered in the schoolroom at Dering Vicarage. There was Nellie, who had made her *début* at a ball the previous Christmas—a bright, wilful girl and acknowledged belle—leaning back in the old rocking-chair, with her feet stuck straight out in front of her, as she contemplated with much complacency a pair of smart clocked stockings and new trim little shoes. The exhibition was evidently for her own private satisfaction; for although the male sex was represented in the room by two young men and a boy, they were only her brothers, and Miss Nellie had arrived at an age when a girl usually ceases to regard the opinion of her family as of paramount importance. The table was laid with the materials for a substantial tea, which, in the temporary absence of the vicar and his wife, the young people invariably ordered in the schoolroom, the Graham boys being now all at home—Theodore, the eldest, for a farewell visit before starting for Paris as attaché to the British Embassy; Philip, from Cambridge, for the vacation; and Ernest, from Winchester, for the Easter holidays.

They were all talking and laughing loudly, chaffing each other and Nellie, while hovering about the only employed

member of the party—a girl who, kneeling on the hearthrug, was toasting muffins for tea. The chaff did not always pass her by, but the remarks were of a different nature to the lordly superiority with which the two elder addressed their younger sister, and conveyed decided friendship, if not admiration. She seemed quite able to hold her own, responding with a quickness and vivacity, and sometimes a demure sarcasm, which kept the ball of conversation rolling gaily, while the pile of buttered muffins in the fender grew steadily higher, and Theodore Graham, with one elbow on the mantelpiece, lazily watched the performance. He was a good-looking young fellow of one-and-twenty, with calm blue eyes and a dark moustache, a trifle spoilt, a trifle self-confident, and vain of his own attractions, inclined to take life easily, and accept success and admiration as a matter of course. He did not dream of offering to help with the muffins; but he was thinking how much that little Beechhaven girl had improved since he was last at home, and that she was really uncommonly pretty, with her dainty complexion, delicate features, and beautiful gazelle eyes. She was certainly a fascinating little thing—not so very little either, for she had attained to the respectable height of five feet four inches; but she was so slenderly made, so fairy-like in her quick, graceful movements, that the diminutive epithet was invariably applied to her. He liked to watch her expression vary with every look and tone; the carnation flush caught from the fire was decidedly becoming, and with what a pretty wave her dark hair grew on her forehead and rippled back from those tiny shell-like ears. In another year she would be a charming woman, although he must confess there had never been anything of the lanky, overgrown school-girl about Winifred at any period of her career; and somewhere about this point in his meditations the object of them rose, and laid aside her toasting fork.

"Now, good people, who wants muffins? Don't all speak at once. Ernie, I commit them to your charge; you will see fair play. Nellie, have you quite done admiring your shoes, or shall I pour out the tea?"

"You do it, there's a dear," responded her friend idly. "You and that teapot always understand each other. It is abominably contrary with me; I turn it over to Phil when you are not here."

"Who makes tea on the latest mathematical principles, and produces straw coloured hot water. What a thing it is to be clever," murmured Theodore, dropping gracefully into a chair by the tea-maker's side, and quizzically eyeing his brother's rather pale face and intellectual forehead.

"At least, I don't give you unadulterated hot water," returned Philip quietly. "Were you here, Winnie, the day Theo kept us waiting half-an-hour for the tea to draw, and then found he had forgotten the leaves?"

"No, indeed, I was not. I should have known better than to expect Theo's mind to descend to anything useful."

Theodore did not quite relish the demure tone, the sparkle of mischief in the beautiful eyes; but he answered imperturbably:

"As everybody seems agreed that my mission in life is to be purely ornamental, I —"

"Ornamental!" interrupted Nellie, scornfully. "Really, Theo, your conceit is past bearing. Who on earth cares what a man looks like, so long as he is not a dwarf nor a Cyclops? Beauty is the exclusive *métier* of women —"

"And puppies," struck in Ernest, with a glance at his elder brother that had the effect of sending a muffin flying over the table at his head.

"Order, please," said Winifred, with a laugh. "I don't know what may be your usual custom at meals, but I thought it was only in the cages of performing bears that food is seen

skimming about in the air. Pass me the muffins, please, Theo, unless you require them all for ammunition. Are you ready for your second cup, Phil?"

"If I marry, I shall take care that my husband is not too handsome," pursued Nellie, with sublime indifference to the muffin interlude. "I will have no rival, not even a looking-glass. I suppose Sir Rawdon is one of the best-looking men you could see, and I never cared for his face at all."

"My dear child, as if you could remember it! You were an infant in arms at that epoch," retorted Theodore, with the crushing weight of his four years' seniority.

"I remember him as well as if I had seen him yesterday. Don't you, Winnie?" exclaimed the girl eagerly; and a shadow crossed Winifred's bright face as she answered:

"Yes, indeed. I don't think it would be possible to forget his face."

"He must be a thundering old fogey now," said Ernest. "Wonder if he is going to hang out on that yacht for evermore, like the Flying Dutchman?"

"He might have had the decency to come home and give me some shooting," grumbled Theodore. "It is preposterous to suppose he can be sporting the willow all this time. Why, it is years and years since poor Lil died."

"It is the least he could do," said Winifred hotly; and then she coloured, as if the words had escaped her unawares. "I mean, he was so old to marry a girl like Lilius," she added lamely, on meeting the inquiring gaze of four pairs of eyes.

"He did not look old," said Nellie; "but I should think he would have to go a long way before he found a woman to become his third wife. It would be a case of Bluebeard and Sister Anne. What is it, Mary?" as a servant entered with a card on a salver, which she presented to the young lady. "A gentleman in the drawing-room? Good heavens! boys, this is too extraordinary. It is Sir Rawdon himself!"

Theodore whistled; Ernest made the natural allusion to the tail of a certain nameless personage; and Winifred turned slightly pale. Philip alone went on consuming muffins with unruffled equanimity.

"Do you think I might bring him in here?" asked Nellie, who had vacated the rocking-chair with surprising celerity, and was touching up her hair before the glass. "It will take so long to have fresh tea made, and I really want some of you to support me."

"Bring him in, by all means," said Theodore, coolly; "and Winnie shall toast him some more muffins. She has lost her colour since she left the fire."

"Waste not, want not," returned Winifred gravely. "If you choose to employ muffins as projectiles, Mr. Theodore Graham, you need not look to me to repair your extravagance."

The truant colour had come back with a rush, and she looked so provokingly pretty, as she shook her head and favoured him with a little frown of mock disapproval, that Theodore began to think he would like to tell her, there and then, his unbiassed opinion of her appearance. Yet she was only a child, he decided, with the superiority of rising twenty-two, a year younger than Nellie; it would be absurd to make pretty speeches to her. So he merely remarked on the necessity for enforcing discipline with juveniles, which roused Ernest to a further retort, and the wordy battle raged on either side of Winifred, and the teapot, until the door opened and Nellie returned, ushering in the visitor with her most gracious air.

"You will excuse a bear-garden, Sir Rawdon," she said, her blue eyes dancing with mischief. "My brothers' manners are not all that could be desired. This is my friend, Winifred Flowers; I daresay you remember her?"

"I remember her as a pretty child," he answered, grace-

fully returning the formal bow with which the young girl greeted him. "I see the blossom has more than fulfilled the promise of the bud. Is this my old friend Ernest? He has indeed grown out of all memory."

"Confound his cheek!" muttered Theodore to himself. "What does he mean by paying her compliments in that barefaced fashion? It is enough to turn the child's head."

He was further discomposed by observing that, so far as he could judge of the appearance of his brother-in-law, whom he had only seen at the wedding, Sir Rawdon was little altered for the worse. The roving sea-life which he had led for the past five years had evidently agreed with his health. His complexion wore its usual pallor, but the smouldering fire still slept in his full dark eyes; neither crowsfeet nor wrinkles had multiplied, his beard was black as ebony, and although the snowy patch had extended across his temple, the rest of his hair was untouched by greyness. He looked a man in the prime of life, as Theodore unwillingly acknowledged to himself; but he thought it would be ridiculous to dread a rival in one of his father's contemporaries. At the same time, there was no occasion for Sir Rawdon to draw his chair so close to Winifred's side that Ernest had to cede him his place at the table. He might confine his attentions to Nellie, instead of so patently addressing his remarks to both the girls. Certainly there was something reassuringly cool in Winifred's quiet, self-possessed manner, but he wished the colour would not come and go in such curious fashion in her cheeks. Why should she flush up whenever the fellow spoke to her? she rarely blushed under his, Mr. Theodore Graham's, speeches.

Sir Rawdon appeared in excellent spirits, and made himself quite at home with the family party. He flattered Nellie, joked with Ernest, roused Philip into an argument on the relative merits of the two great Universities, and would have

entirely conciliated Theodore by offering him introductions in Paris, had not the young fellow jealously observed that his brother-in-law lost no opportunity of conveying a compliment to Winifred—not in the frank, brotherly fashion in which he spoke to Nellie, but with the air of a man of the world addressing a beautiful woman. Theodore inwardly fumed. What a fool Sir Rawdon was to go putting such ideas into the head of a girl of sixteen! Of course Gerald Daubeny would not like it. He was a sensible fellow, and evidently regarded his adopted sister as still a child; and the Graham boys had great friendship and admiration for Gerald.

Presently Mr. and Mrs. Graham returned from a visit they had been paying, and Sir Rawdon rose to join them in the drawing-room.

"May I have the pleasure of seeing you home?" he said to Winifred. "I am going on to Beechhaven in a few minutes."

"Thank you, you are very kind; but I am afraid I ought to start at once," she answered. "Mrs. Daubeny will be expecting me."

"Humbug, Winnie, you need not go yet!" exclaimed Ernest eagerly. "You promised to help me with that sketch; and you particularly said you need not hurry back, because Lady Lorimer was having tea with Mrs. Daubeny."

"But it is so late," responded Winifred, hurriedly. "I really think I ought to go."

"It is not a bit late,—look there," and he held out his watch before her. "Come along, Winnie. I have done no end to-day on purpose for you to see. You won't leave me in the lurch?"

Winifred saw there was no escape, and submitted graciously to be carried off to the boys' workshop, and supplied with brushes and colours. She had naturally out-

grown her childish terrors and superstitions, but she still retained an instinctive dread of, almost aversion to, Sir Rawdon. She no longer considered his curse to be other than a morbid fancy, but she felt strongly that, believing, as he evidently did, that those he loved were doomed, he ought sooner to have died than to have married Lilius. Winifred's ideal was high, and a man who could deliberately consent to gratify his passion at such a fearful risk to the woman he loved, seemed to her contemptibly weak, if not criminal, in his conduct. He was, however, Gerald's uncle and the Grahams' brother-in-law; she must be civil to him, and try to forget her prejudices. She only hoped he would not remain long in the neighbourhood. There was something in the glance of those impenetrable dark eyes, when she met it dwelling on her face, that made her own gaze fall and her colour rise, and set her heart beating with almost the old indefinable fear of her childhood.

Wishing herself all the time at home, she put on her hat and jacket, bade "good-night" to the Grahams, and started with Sir Rawdon at a brisk pace down the lane. The day had been cold and showery, heavy clouds covered the sky, through which the setting sun broke forth at intervals in red shafts of lurid light, and a bitter north-west wind was whistling past the leafless trees, nipping the early primroses in the hedgerows, and lashing the sullen sea to white-armed wrath and fury.

CHAPTER XIII.

A Spectre from the Past.

 OT particularly inviting weather to welcome me to my native shores," remarked Sir Rawdon, turning up the fur collar of his coat. "I almost wonder at myself for coming back to this detestable climate; but one grows weary of perpetual wanderings, even when one's only welcome home is to a dreary house and the pang of bitter memories. Man is a gregarious animal, and the cravings of instinct are painfully strong; but I beg your pardon," and he interrupted himself hastily. "Solitude promotes egotism. Forgive my grumbling. A man would be blindly selfish indeed who could look on your face and not be happier to think that there is sunshine in the world, though it may never shine on him."

"You should have waited to come back until the summer," said Winifred quietly. "March is always a cold month in England."

"And you live here all the year round, Winifred,—may I call you Winifred, on the strength of our old friendship?"

"Of course you can; everyone does. I am not grown-up, you know. I shall not be seventeen till May."

She spoke with the utmost simplicity, but she instinctively quickened her pace. There was something in Sir Rawdon's tone that jarred on her sensitive ears, and she did not like the open admiration in his looks, which was too plain for even her innocence to mistake its meaning.

"Really, you surprise me. Not that you look a day over seventeen, but you have the air and manners of a *Parisienne*. I suppose you have been at school in France?"

"I have never been out of England. It must be very interesting to visit other countries. Gerald was yachting off the French coast last year. A friend of his has a steam-yacht, and asked Gerald to join his party. They had a delightful time."

"Gerald always seems to fall on his feet. The French are most charming people; I wish more English girls could take lessons from them in point of manners. A *Parisienne* is seldom good-looking, but so utterly fascinating, one forgets to criticise her face. When English beauty is added to French charm, the *ensemble* is nothing short of perfection."

"You seem to have deeply studied the subject, Sir Rawdon," returned Winifred, with some sarcasm. "I wonder you do not take up your abode in Paris."

"I spent years in Paris at one time of my life; but when a man gets to my age, he begins to hanker after his own home, though home may mean to him only walls and furniture."

"I would not advise you to try living in a caravan," said Winifred, with an amused flash from her eyes; "but if walls oppress you, Sir Rawdon, you can always return to your yacht."

"You are right; I have the world before me, and no human being to care whether I live or die."

In spite of herself, Winifred was touched by the pathetic sadness of her companion's tone.

"Why, Sir Rawdon, you have Gerald and Mrs. Daubeny. You talk as if you had no relations in the world."

"Gerald will marry sooner or later, and I scarcely think Mrs. Daubeny would break her heart if I went off the hooks to-morrow to make way for her son."

The girl coloured. She was sufficiently acquainted with the private sentiments of her adopted mother to know that Sir Rawdon hardly overshot the truth.

"I do not think Gerald will ever marry," she said gravely, her thoughts flying to the dreary Daubeny vault where she believed Gerald's heart was buried with his love.

"Of course he will; he is barely thirty, and has all his life before him. Why do you look so grave, Winifred? Would you rather he did not marry?"

"Not if it would make him happier." Winifred was vexed to find her eyes falling and her colour rising before the penetrating glance turned upon her. "Look, what a strange gleam of sunlight!" she added hastily, as a wild red shaft pierced the dark cloud, and fell through the leafless hedges at their feet. "It is a stormy sunset."

"I suppose it is. Of course, marrying would make Gerald happier. There is nothing better on earth than love and companionship. Man was not made to live alone."

"But Gerald is not alone," objected Winifred, rather indignantly.

"Far from it, with you for his sister. If you only knew how I envy him. It was of myself I was thinking. You cannot guess how terribly lonely life is to me. Do you think, Winifred, that I could ever find a wife to love me?"

The red gleam was full on his face as he bent towards her, increasing its strange pallor, while his dark eyes seemed to glow like living coals, and the girl shrank back alarmed, reminded, she knew not why, of a picture she had seen of Mephistopheles talking to Gretchen in the garden.

"How can I tell?" she answered. "You ask very extraordinary questions, Sir Rawdon."

"Has anyone ever told you, Winifred," he pursued, regardless of the coldness of her manner, "that you are beautiful, that away from this lonely spot you might have the world at your feet? Would you like to be rich and admired, to express no wish that was not immediately gratified, to be queen of the society in which you moved, to be

courted, loved, and cherished, and your life made fair and brilliant as the sunlight on a summer sea?"

"I should like to be rich," she said; "oh! very much, indeed, if I could give it all to Gerald."

Her answer came like water on fire. Sir Rawdon drew back sharply. The cloud had closed on the sungleam, and his face looked stern and cold.

"You did not answer my question," he said. "I see nothing extraordinary in asking your opinion on my matrimonial chances."

"I can't give any opinion," she answered quickly; "I am no judge at all."

"Then your opinion is unfavourable? Tell me, I only ask from curiosity."

Winifred intended making some light or evasive reply, but the dark eyes were fixed upon her face, and seemed, against her will, to draw forth the thought that was in her mind.

"I think that a woman who knew anything of your past history would as soon jump over those cliffs," and she pointed to a glimpse of the rugged coast-line stretching away in the distance, "as become your wife. I beg your pardon," and the words were scarcely out of her mouth before Winifred had started and crimsoned from brow to chin at her unintentional rudeness; "I can't think what possessed me to say such a thing. I really beg your pardon, Sir Rawdon. You know I was at Lyncscombe Towers all that terrible time, and it has given me a perfect horror of the place."

She looked so evidently distressed, that Sir Rawdon answered quickly:

"Pray, don't apologise. I remember what a nervous little thing you used to be; but you have surely outgrown such weakness?"

"Apparently not," said Winifred, struggling with her

embarrassment. "I have a very good memory for the events of my childhood; they impressed themselves upon me in a way that I find it difficult to shake off."

To her intense relief, at this moment the sound of horse's feet approaching at a quick trot struck on her ears, and the next minute Gerald pulled up beside them.

"By Jove! Uncle Rawdon! What an amazing sight! I am glad to see you back in England."

Jumping off his horse, he approached the baronet with outstretched hand, while Sir Rawdon glanced critically at his nephew as he advanced to meet him.

Gerald had not altered much in the five past years: his figure was broader, having filled out to the full proportions of his fine athletic frame; his complexion was more bronzed, and his tawny moustache was longer, while his face looked decidedly older, the boyish fire and impetuosity having yielded place to a gravity almost sternness when in repose. Yet the grey eyes were frank and kindly as ever, his smile had lost nothing of its sweetness, and his laugh rang clear and true, if not quite so frequently as in former days.

The two men greeted each other cordially; and hanging his horse's bridle over his arm, Gerald walked on beside Sir Rawdon, with eager questions as to his travels and future plans, while Winifred lost no time in entrenching herself on the further side of Gerald's horse. She slipped away to her room on their arrival at the Cottage, and remained upstairs so long that at last there came a quick knock at the door.

"Are you here, Mignonette? What are you doing by yourself in the cold? The mother says you are to come down to the fire."

"I am coming," and the door opened immediately. "Is Sir Rawdon going to stay to dinner, Gerald?"

"No, he is unsociable as usual. Says he ordered a

carriage from Aylsmouth to come for him at seven; so you need have no alarms, little housekeeper."

"Oh, there is plenty of dinner!" answered Winifred with a smile. "I remember he never used to eat half as much as you do, Gerald;" and she ran downstairs, pausing in the hall to look at her watch before entering the drawing-room.

Sir Rawdon was seated near the couch, and Winifred felt his eyes upon her as she went up to kiss Mrs. Daubeny, and give her a message from Mrs. Graham. Taking her work, she sat quietly down beside Gerald, and only joined in the conversation when pointedly addressed. This was such unusual conduct that Gerald, who often teased her on her love of chattering, soon turned round with the question:

"Have you got a headache, child? What has happened to your tongue this evening?"

"I have no headache, but it is tired," she answered, looking up with a laugh in her eyes. "Theo wanted me to give him a French lesson before tea; and, oh, dear! he was so stupid. I could not make him hear any difference between *an* and *en*; and when the others came in, they talked so loud, I had to scream in order to be heard at all. Nellie does not seem to mind it; but I am thankful we have not got a houseful of boys."

"You find one enough," said Sir Rawdon, with a glance in the direction of his nephew.

"Quite enough, he is so big;" and Winifred's eyes sought Gerald's face with a look of such innocent pride and affection that Sir Rawdon rather hastily averted his gaze, and requested his nephew to inquire if the carriage had arrived.

"How long shall you remain in Aylsmouth? I hope you will come and see us again," said Mrs. Daubeny courteously as he bade her good-bye.

"Thank you; I should have been delighted, but I am going up to town to-morrow. Good-bye, Winifred," and he

turned to press the young girl's hand, "I hope it may not be long before we meet again."

Winifred gave him a polite smile, which might mean anything; but the moment he had left the room, accompanied by his nephew, she burst out impetuously:

"I hope it may be a very, very long time. Oh, mother! don't be vexed; I cannot like Sir Rawdon, and I don't believe you care for him either."

She knelt down by the couch, and Mrs. Daubeny passed her hand lovingly over the soft dark hair.

"Winifred, child, you must not let prejudices run away with you. Gerald is very fond of his uncle."

"But Gerald has a knack of seeing the best in people. A man would have to be an absolute villain if Gerald could not find a good word to say for him. Don't you think, mother, dear," and the brown eyes were lifted mischievously to the invalid's face, "quite between ourselves, you know, that you and I have sometimes sharper sight?"

And Mrs. Daubeny, though she shook her head reprovingly, attempted no serious reply in the negative to this sapient criticism.

Almost a month had elapsed since Sir Rawdon's visit, when one Saturday afternoon Winifred was driving in the dogcart through Aylsmouth from the School of Art to fetch Gerald from the bank. She always delighted in this weekly privilege, since she had obtained Gerald's leave to sit perched aloft on the high driving seat, Tomlins being relegated to the back. She could drive very well, and immensely enjoyed her own importance, as she deftly guided the horse through the crowded streets. She reached the bank from which the clerks were pouring out, most of them raising their hats eagerly to the pretty driver of the cart, while several, who were Gerald's intimate friends, came up to speak to her. Winifred held quite a little court during the few minutes she

had to wait, her bright eyes and quick tongue finding full employment as she laughed and talked, evidently quite at her ease, and more than once administering a sharp snub to an unfortunate young man who incurred her disapproval by venturing on what she considered a liberty. The moment, however, that Gerald appeared at the bank-door, the girl's interest was entirely withdrawn from the group on the pavement.

"You are good and punctual!" she exclaimed joyously. "I have only been here just five minutes. Will you drive, Gerald?"

"No, keep the reins; I am not ambitious of the honour," he answered with a smile, and Winifred's face lighted up with pleasure.

It was a little formula they went through every Saturday afternoon; but she never felt quite certain, until she received his answer, that Gerald would really resign to her the coveted position. He mounted to his seat at her side, and with bows and smiles to the clerks, and a most scientific flourish of her whip, Winifred drove off at a quick trot down the street.

"Oh, Gerald, what do you think!" she exclaimed breathlessly, the moment they had started. "Herr Jaeger likes my picture so much—the holiday one, you know, of the *Petrel* and the bay—that he wants to send it up to one of the exhibitions in London. Only fancy if they should accept it, wouldn't it be too ——"

Winifred stopped short with a sudden start, clutching wildly at the reins in a fashion which threw the horse almost back on its haunches, while her eyes, with a terrified expression, looked after a figure on the pavement. A cab which was following was nearly on the top of them before it could pull up; the horse began to plunge, and Gerald, catching whip and reins from the girl's powerless hands, administered a sharp cut that sent it off in a canter which it was

several moments before he could subdue into a trot. Then in natural amazement he looked at his companion for an explanation of her singular conduct. Winifred was very pale, and her eyes met his with a pleading deprecating expression.

"Gerald, I am so sorry. I did not mean to pull up like that; but I saw a man on the pavement that I am certain was my father."

"Did he see you?"

"No, he was walking straight along talking to another man; but I am sure it was father." Winifred half rose, looking back over her shoulder; the figure, however, which had roused her apprehension had vanished in the crowd, and she sank into her seat with a shiver. "What can have brought him here, Gerald?"

"Perhaps he is on the fairfield again. Would you like to go and see?"

"No, no; please let us go straight on. And will you drive? I lost my head altogether, and perhaps I might do it again."

They changed places, and Winifred looked half timidly into her companion's grave face as they drove on towards the country road.

"Are you angry with me, Gerald? I am very sorry I was so stupid."

"No, little one; but I wish for your sake you were not given to these sudden panics. If it was your father, he can't do any harm to you now."

"I suppose not; but only think if he should want to have me back. Oh, Gerald! you would not give me up?"

The quivering lip, the old wistful look in the eyes, carried the young man's thoughts back in a moment to the booth-theatre, and the little helpless, trembling child who had clung to him as her protector. His features settled into their

sternest look, and his hands involuntarily clenched upon the reins as he answered :

" Give you up to that brute ! Child, have you no faith in me at all ? "

" I know you would not if you could help it, but has he not got the right to take me away if he chooses ? "

" He had better not try." Gerald's lips were compressed in his most determined fashion. " Right or no right, you belong to me, little one ; and I pledge you my word I will never give you up."

Winifred heaved a sigh of intense relief ; and looking down at her brightening face, Gerald's grave features relaxed into an amused smile.

" You and I are wise people, Mignonette, to be bothering our heads over a thing that will probably never happen. Rather like Hans Andersen's young woman, who let the beer run away while she cried over the possible evil effects of the fall of the hatchet in the roof. Now tell me about your picture : what did Herr Jaeger say ? "

Winifred's composure returned, and she chatted away gaily, until the dogcart turned in at the lodge-gates of a house about two miles from Beechhaven, which possessed the unusual appendage of a tennis-court for real, not lawn-tennis. Gerald went off to play with the master of the house, and Winifred had scarcely reached the drawing-room when she was set upon by two small boys, evidently on the watch for her coming, and carried away to sail boats upon a duck-pond, an occupation in which the girl seemed to take as much interest as the children themselves.

" Don't let them worry you, Winifred," their mother had remarked placidly ; and the girl, who infinitely preferred the banks of the pond to the drawing-room, made an eager reply in the negative.

A strong breeze was blowing, which bore the miniature

fleet at racing speed across the water ; and great was the excitement of the boys, who looked upon Winifred as an authority in all nautical matters, not indeed without reason, for she had learned to sail the *Petrel* almost as well as Gerald himself. An imperative summons to nursery tea at last put a stop to the amusement ; and returning to the house, Winifred found the game over, and the cart at the door.

"What a wind there is," she said, holding her hat as they turned out at the gates. "It is blowing much harder than when we left Aylsmouth. We shall hardly get a sail this evening, Gerald."

"No, there will be too much sea, and there is more wind coming. Look at those mare's-tails."

"And how the clouds are flying," said Winifred. "I believe we shall have a real storm to-night. What a lucky thing you are not going out. I shall go down to the bay after tea ; the tide will be high, and I want to get an effect of spray against the headland."

Arming herself with her paint-box, as soon as tea was over, she came back into the drawing-room to give her adopted mother the farewell kiss without which Winifred never left the house.

"Take care of yourself, my dear child," said Mrs. Daubeny tenderly. "The wind sounds really frightful; I don't half like your going out alone."

"Never mind, mother; she is as happy in the water as out of it, if she should be blown in," said Gerald with a laugh. "I will go down presently and pick up the pieces, so take care I don't catch you in mischief, little Nixie."

Winifred laughed as she turned towards the door ; but she paused a moment as she reached it, and glanced round the room, thinking how comfortable and homelike it looked with its spring flowers and cheerful wood-fire, the tea-table drawn up beside Mrs. Daubeny's couch, and Gerald leaning

idly back in the big arm-chair, while Grim, now grown an elderly dog, not much given to indulging in unnecessary exertion, snoozed peacefully at his master's feet. It was probably owing to her alarm in the afternoon; but as she looked, there rose up before her, distinct as if she had seen it the day before, a picture of the small close caravans and dismal theatre, and herself, a little trembling drudge, cowering under her father's blows and curses; and moved by a sudden impulse, she darted forward, and, kneeling by the couch, threw her arms round Mrs. Daubeny's neck.

"Oh, mother darling! how can I ever be grateful enough to you and Gerald for all you have done for me? I would die for you any day, you know I would, mother!" and as Mrs. Daubeny looked up in amazement at the quick, hurried tones, and the sight of the tears trembling on the dark lashes, Winifred kissed her passionately, and springing to her feet was out of the room in a moment.

"Why, what possesses the child?" asked Mrs. Daubeny in surprise. "I said nothing to put such ideas into her head."

"She had a fright to-day," said Gerald, and he proceeded to inform his mother of the episode in their drive through Aylsmouth.

"Surely there can be no fear of Flowers claiming her?" said Mrs. Daubeny in alarm. "It would be too terrible now that she is just growing up."

"He may claim her," said Gerald with a steely flash from his grey eyes, "but he won't get her, mother, not while I am alive."

"Of course there is the £50 for which he would become liable. That ought to be a safeguard with a man in his position. Still, I suppose the law would be on his side. Gerald, it is horrible to think of; we cannot give up the child to such a life as that."

"We can't, and we won't," said Gerald doggedly, "let the law do what it pleases;" and leaning back in his chair, he opened a magazine, and appeared to dismiss the subject from his mind.

A few minutes later there came a ring at the bell, followed, as the servant opened the door, by a parley in men's voices in the hall. Grim pricked up his ears and growled.

"Quiet, good dog," said Gerald. "Who is it?" he asked, as the maid entered the room.

"Two gentlemen to see you, sir. Mr. Flowers ——"

"What?" and Gerald was on his feet in a moment. "Flowers—are you sure?"

"Yes, sir; he says he is Miss Winifred's father."

An expression rarely heard from Gerald's lips escaped them at that moment.

"Where have you put the man?"

"In the smoking-room, sir."

"Very well, I will go to him;" and as the servant left the room, Gerald turned towards the couch. "So the tug has come, mother; you agree with me, the child must be saved at any cost?"

Mrs. Daubeny looked up, an anxious, troubled expression on her face.

"What do you mean, Gerald?" she asked fearfully.

"I cannot tell till I have seen the fellow. I only know I am not going to give her up, and I should like to feel your heart was with me in the fight."

He bent over the couch, and the invalid tried to smile.

"Yes, you must save her, Gerald; only, my dear boy, do nothing rash. It frightens me to see that look in your face."

"Don't fear, little mother;" and he stooped and kissed her. "I will be discretion itself. I know what is at stake;" and turning, he left the room and closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER XIV.

A Race with Death.



HE moment Gerald's eyes fell on his visitor, he saw that a considerable change had taken place in his appearance since they had faced each other under the flickering oil-lamp in the booth-theatre.

Mr. Flowers's threadbare garments had given place to an unexceptionable black frock-coat and dark grey trowsers; he wore lavender gloves and a diamond pin, while on the table beside him reposed a new tall hat and silver-mounted cane. His face, however, had deteriorated as much as his dress had improved; it looked sunken and haggard, debased with the traces of ungovernable passion and intemperance; his black brows seemed fixed in a perpetual scowl above the fierce sullen eyes, which glared in something of the fashion of a hungry wolf, and the thin lips and yellow teeth looked even more cruel and repulsive than of old. It made Gerald's blood run cold to think of Winifred for one moment in the power of such a man.

With his sternest expression and the very slightest inclination of his head, he advanced a few steps into the room, and paused confronting Flowers as he turned from the window on hearing the opening of the door. Beside him stood a tall coarse-looking man, arrayed in a large check ulster, who eyed Gerald, on his entrance, from head to foot as if he were mentally appraising the young man's size and strength.

"I suppose you can guess what I have come for?" began Flowers gruffly, finding Gerald did not speak. "I want my daughter, Mr. Gerald Daubeny."

"Your daughter! Who are you?" asked Gerald sharply, determined to contest every inch of the ground.

"James Flowers, at your service. Here is my card," and he flung one down on the table. "I have no doubt Winifred's memory will be longer than yours; she has good reason to remember me by the same token, Mr. Daubeny, that I have not forgotten you, nor the strength of your arm. However, that matter may stand over for the present. If the girl is amenable, I am willing to let bygones be bygones; if not, I will settle accounts with her instead of you."

"You are going on a little too fast," said Gerald coldly. "In the first place it devolves upon you to prove that my ward is your daughter. In the second——"

"Look here," and taking a packet from his coat-pocket, Flowers tossed it on the table before Gerald. "I was not born yesterday, Mr. Daubeny. Here are copies of my marriage certificate, and Winifred's birth and baptism. I can bring the witnesses to swear to that little transaction between you and me at Aylsmouth, and I fancy you have old servants who could be subpœaned to prove the girl's identity with the child you brought to this house that 14th of September. There"—and deliberately opening a pocket-book, he laid down an envelope—"are five ten-pound notes: and now, perhaps, you will have the goodness to inform Winifred I have a carriage waiting to take her with me to Aylsmouth."

Gerald was silent, carefully scrutinising the papers in the vain hope of finding in them some flaw. The ground seemed to be cut from under his feet, but he resolved to take his stand on the strict letter of the law.

"These documents may be forged, for all I know to the contrary," he said decidedly. "You must make good your claim in a court of law, and in the meantime I refuse to give up my ward."

Flowers smiled, a smile which made Gerald start; it was

so maliciously triumphant, he saw the man had another card to play.

"You refuse? Very good, Mr. Daubeny; we understand each other. For all you may say to the contrary, you are perfectly aware that the girl is my daughter, and that I have the right to claim her. Therefore, you are acting illegally. Now, I don't choose to wait until the lawyers have fought out the question. Possession is nine-tenths of the law. I have no theatrical company of my own at present; but a friend of mine has seen the girl, and taken a fancy to her. He has offered me a sum for her services which I might not get every day; so I want her at once, and I mean to have her. I guessed you would kick up a shindy about letting her go, so I brought my friend here, Captain Lawley; and if you will take the trouble to look out of the window, you will see there are three more gentlemen in the carriage who aren't exactly chickens any of them. I reckon the five of us, if it comes to force, will be more than a match for you and your old gardener, and this house is a most handy long way from any other. The law can't touch me for insisting on my parental rights; and if you choose to interfere with them, you must take the consequences of being temporarily deprived of your liberty in your own house. I warn you, though, that Winifred shall suffer for any inconvenience you put me to on her account."

Gerald drew himself up to his full height, his eyes flashing and his fingers tingling with impatience to meet his visitor's impertinence by the rough-and-ready method of fist to fist, but a moment's reflection made him pause. He might get the better of Flowers, but there was the friend to be reckoned with, of whose apparent strength and muscular proportions the young man now became unpleasantly aware. At that moment also the large waggonette, waiting outside, moved slowly past the window, and he saw that Flowers had

spoken the truth. Besides the driver, it contained three men of decidedly pugilistic appearance, and Gerald grew desperate as he realised the powerlessness of his position. At least Winifred was not in the house, but at any moment she might return, and walk into the trap laid for her. To see her carried off before his eyes, and not be able to help her, the thought was maddening ; but he spoke coolly and composedly.

"If you can prove yourself Winifred's father, I am willing to compound to any reasonable extent. As you do not profess yourself actuated by paternal affection, I suppose I am right in concluding that it is money you require ?"

"I don't want your money ; should not fancy you had much to offer," said Flowers, insolently. "I have come for the girl, and I mean to have her. You may make your proposals to my friend if you choose, but I hardly reckon you will get round him ;" and he laughed in a fashion that made Gerald's blood boil, and convinced him that further parley was useless. Evidently Flowers expected to make more out of the transaction than there was any chance of the young man being able to pay him.

"I am thankful to tell you that your plot has failed, you scoundrel," he observed haughtily. "My ward is absent from home."

"I warn you not to utter libellous words before a witness, Mr. Daubeny, or you will find yourself let in for two actions instead of one. As it happens, I have already found out from the servant that Winifred is not far off. Either you will take me and Captain Lawley in search of her,—or," and he made a sign to which his friend replied by significantly displaying a piece of rope before Gerald's eyes, "we shall make you a prisoner under the charge of our friends outside, while we look for the girl ourselves."

Gerald was silent for a moment ; his eyes looked danger-

ous, and the two men instinctively threw themselves into attitudes of defence.

"You will not have far to search," he said suddenly, pointing to the window, and as they involuntarily glanced towards it, he sprang to the door, and the next instant had shut and locked it on them.

Dashing through the hall without stopping even to snatch his hat from a peg, he passed out at the garden door, and ran at the top of his speed across the lawn to the wood. He had a start, and that was all: the imprisoned men would only have to get out of the window and summon their friends, to be on his track in a moment; but he gained the cover of the wood before they appeared round the house, and he knew that ignorance of the ground must necessarily retard their movements.

The wind was howling furiously through the trees, and the blast that met Gerald as he emerged upon the shore made him fairly stagger, but not for an instant did his purpose falter. His quick eyes at once discerned Winifred at some little distance, palette in hand, seated under the shelter of a rock, and he shouted loudly to her as he turned to open the boathouse door. The wind carried off his voice, but he called again, and as the girl looked up, he beckoned her peremptorily towards him. Struck by something unusual in his appearance, she promptly answered the summons, and reached his side just as, exerting his utmost strength, he ran the little boat to the water's edge, and dashed up again to the boathouse.

"Quick, child! take the jib, and get into the dingey," was all he said, tossing her the small sail; and, without question or hesitation, Winifred obeyed. She was terrified by the strange look on his face, even more than by the idea of venturing out on the stormy sea; but her trust in Gerald was implicit. If he had told her to jump from the

rocks into the surf, she would have obeyed him just the same.

Shouldering the *Petrel's* mainsail, and snatching up the dingey's sculls, Gerald ran to the boat, tossed the sails in after Winifred, and as a big roller came foaming up the beach, pushed off, knee-deep in water, and sprang in over the stern. It was scarcely afloat before shouts came from the wood, and down the path to the shore raced Flowers, panting and breathless, followed by his four friends.

"Sold, by Jove!" murmured Gerald, with a gleam of amusement in his eyes, as every sweep of his sculls widened the distance between the boat and the pursuers. "Hold on to the mainsail for your life, little one; we will run the *Petrel* out under their very noses."

Rocking like a cork on the swell, which had penetrated even to her sheltered basin, the little cutter rode at anchor under the rocks; and, not without considerable difficulty, Gerald succeeded in transferring Winifred and the sails from the dingey to the yacht, when he lashed the former in its usual position astern.

"Now we can take it easy," he said with a sigh of relief, which ended in a laugh as his eyes fell upon the figure of Flowers on the beach gesticulating, and evidently shouting violently, although the wind carried away the sound of his voice. "You are safe for the present, Mignonette. Don't look so frightened, my child;" and he took the girl's little trembling hands in his. "I have been one too many for that blackguard. He came here with those other four fellows to carry you off, and knock me down if I resisted. I rather think he will find his little plan won't work as smoothly as he expected."

Winifred tried to smile, but her lips quivered, and she was trembling all over with alarm.

"I am not frightened really," she said. "I could not be

with you, Gerald ; only you looked so strange, I knew something dreadful had happened. How very, very good of you to save me ! Would father really have taken me away with those horrible men ? ” and she shuddered as she glanced towards the shore.

“ Yes ; he has been offered a situation for you—as actress, I suppose. Never fear, little one ; he shall not have you. Now help me to reef.”

“ Must we sail in this wind ? ” and Winifred threw a dismayed glance at the stormy sky and sea stretching away beyond the sheltered bay. Gerald’s eyes followed her gaze, and his expression grew grave and anxious. He looked at the shore, and then back at the wistful face turned imploringly towards him.

“ Look here, little one,” he said. “ I will tell you the exact facts of our position, and you shall decide what we are to do. If we could get the police here, we should be safe for the time. Flowers has no legal power to claim you till he has carried his case into court. The mother may send Tomlins for the police, though the chances are the driver of the waggonette has his orders and will let no one leave the house. Even if he does go, however, I will tell you what will happen. Do you see there are only four men now on shore ? Long before Tomlins could reach the police-station, the fifth man will have galloped one of the carriage horses into Aylsmouth, chartered the first tug that has her steam up, and brought her round to our bay, while those other fellows stay to guard the shore. You would be transferred to the tug or waggonette, and there would be an end of the matter. If we sail, I daresay they will give chase ; but we have a good hour’s start, and in this gale the *Petrel* could show a clean pair of heels to the fastest tug afloat. They would not have the ghost of a chance of catching us, and it will be dark before long. So much for them. Now we have ourselves to think

of. It is going to be a dirty night ; the *Petrel* is not so young as she was, and she is an uncommonly small boat to live in a rough sea. If she is not turned over, or swamped, she may spring a leak. We should take our lives in our hands, and I tell you plainly we are just as likely to go to the bottom, as to win into port. We must simply keep her head before the wind and let her run, and what may become of us Heaven only knows."

He paused and waited for the girl's reply, which was not a moment in coming.

"I would much rather be drowned with you, Gerald, than let father take me away from you."

Something in the perfect simplicity of the answer, the child-like trust in the beautiful eyes turned upon him, moved Gerald strangely. Winifred was never more a child than at that moment, and yet her look and words seemed to come like a flash of light rending a veil from his eyes. He had always thought of the girl as his little sister ; now, in one instant, he realised that she was a woman, and the most precious thing in all the world to him. His old love for Lilius appeared cold and poor, compared to the agony which possessed him at the thought of losing Winifred. It needed all his self-control to keep him, then and there, from catching her in his arms, and pressing a lover's, not a brother's, kisses upon her winsome lips. A fierce joy leaped through his veins. She was his own—his own ; she had given herself to his keeping in the face of death. They would sail out together into the raving night, and even death should never part them more.

Before he could speak, Winifred had uttered a startled exclamation, and laid her hand in his.

"Oh, Gerald, how selfish of me ! I was thinking only of myself. Of course, you must not run such a risk for me. Take me to the shore,—only, could you not manage to upset me on the way ?"

The little quiver in her last words—the shudder that ran through her frame—appealed in an instant to Gerald's sense of chivalry and honour. He felt utterly ashamed to think how nearly he had betrayed the girl's innocent trust.

"I would rather go to the bottom twenty times over than give you up to that brute," he said energetically. "Never fear, Mignonette, we will win through somehow."

"But, Gerald, your mother—think how anxious she will be about you. You must not come with me, indeed. You are all she has in the world."

A certain Saying rose to Gerald's lips: "A man shall leave his father and his mother, and cleave unto his wife;" but he did not utter it aloud.

"Why, child, are you not her daughter?" he said brightly. "The mother told me to save you, and I will, to the utmost of my power. I forbid you to say another word, unless you tell me on your honour that you have changed your mind upon your own account."

"I could not say that," said Winifred, hesitatingly; "but——"

"No *buts*; to work, or the tug may catch us after all. I would give something to be near enough to see Flowers's face when he watches us shoot out of the bay."

Winifred was not allowed another instant to yield to her own thoughts. Gerald kept her fully employed, while he rattled on in his brightest manner, affecting to consider it nothing but a joke to put to sea in the teeth of the storm without coat, hat, or any provisions but the tin of biscuits and flask of brandy which he always kept in the *Petrel's* locker.

"I daren't run the mainsail up here," he said at last, when all was ready. "We should be on the rocks before we could get any way on the boat. Take the helm, little one, and I will row out to the middle of the bay."

He unshipped the heavy oars, cast the yacht loose from

her moorings, and, standing up in the centre, rowed, with strong powerful strokes, out into the bay.

"Now we have room enough, Mignonette; keep her steady, and whatever you do, don't let go the sheet."

He shipped the oars, and the next moment, amid wild fluttering and flapping, the white sail, considerably diminished by the reefing, ran up to its place, the boat heeled over till her gunwale almost touched the water, and then, with a bound, she began to move, flying towards the entrance of the bay. Gerald took helm and sheet from Winifred, cast off the dingey, which could only impede their progress, and the *Petrel*, like a living thing, fled away before the raging northerly gale.

Relieved from her post, Winifred looked eagerly back to the shore, where she could plainly discern the four figures, one of whom—she had no doubt which—was violently shaking his fist at the boat. Then her gaze turned to Gerald, as he stood at the helm, the wind buffeting his fair uncovered head, his grey eyes, bright with the sense of peril and excitement, gazing straight before him as he steered through the land-locked bay, a calm, steadfast look on his handsome face. He caught her eye for a moment as she glanced towards him, and smiled, such a tender protecting smile, that Winifred thought of her childish fancy when he had suddenly appeared in the dismal theatre to save her from torture, if not death, and had seemed to her God's angel sent from heaven. Surely no pictured St. Michael with his flaming sword, on canvas or painted window, could be half so grand and noble as this man who was now risking his life to save her from a fate she dreaded more than death.

A sailing-boat in a gale of wind is hardly the place for indulging in sentimental considerations; the jib-sheets required attention, a sudden blast carried away her hat, and Winifred found it hard to keep her balance when they reached

the open sea and the *Petrel* rose and fell upon the huge green waves, skimming like a bird over their surface. It was a dismal prospect. On the one hand, the frowning barrier of cliffs, with the spray dashing against their rugged face; and on the other, the wide expanse of heaving water, churned into foam by the bitter wind which was chasing the dark clouds over the gloomy sky. It was very cold, and Winifred, clad in her warm winter jacket, became seriously concerned for Gerald, begging him to put on a rug which she produced from the locker.

"Why, my dear little girl, it would be overboard in half a minute," he said, with a laugh. "How could I sail the boat unless my arms were free? I am really not cold; it is no easy work keeping her head straight in this sea. Put it over your own knees, child; you had better keep warm while you can."

The daylight faded, and as the darkness increased the wind seemed to blow harder and harder, and the waves became loftier and more threatening. All Gerald's skill in steering could not avert an occasional dash of spray over the gunwale, and small pools of water began to collect in the bottom of the boat. Several times, as the land receded from their view, Winifred rose and cast anxious looks round the dim horizon; but though the smoke of two or three steamers was visible in the distance, not one seemed to be in pursuit of the little cutter, which must have appeared as a mere speck upon the wild waste of waters.

"Do you mind pumping a bit?" said Gerald presently. "We have shipped a good lot of water; and we really don't need any more ballast on board."

Winifred seized the pump-handle, and soon emptied the boat; but every few minutes there came a fresh dash of spray, and before long she had to repeat the operation.

"Take it easy," said Gerald, with a smile. "You need

not work so energetically; we are not sinking yet, and I am afraid you have your work cut out for you, my Nixie. I wish I had a second pair of hands."

"Oh, I don't mind; it keeps me warm," said Winifred. "I am not a bit tired. I suppose I had better light the lamps soon?"

"Yes; there is not much daylight left;" and he glanced towards the western horizon, where a wild red line, like a streak of blood, lay between the darkening sea and sky.

Winifred watched it with a shuddering gaze. It seemed to her an ominous token that the last gleam of day should assume such a ghastly form. Who could tell what might have befallen them before the sunrise broke upon that night of storm and tempest? And as the thought passed through her mind she left her seat and crept up to Gerald's side.

"Do you think we have any chance?" she asked, in a faltering voice. "Can the *Petrel* live through the night? Tell me the truth;" and her eager eyes scanned his face, lighted up by that strange lurid streak.

"I don't like the look of the sky," he answered frankly, "and I fear there is worse to come; but courage, Mignonette, we will never say die. The *Petrel* has behaved splendidly so far, and I think we have a very good chance of weathering out the storm. Are you frightened, my poor little girl?"

"I don't want to die," she said, looking up at him with the simplicity of a child. "You have made my life so happy, Gerald. I do want to live, if we could always be together; but I came to ask you, if the boat really does go down, you will hold me—won't you? I don't think I should mind being drowned if I felt your arm tight round me."

For some moments Gerald could not trust himself to speak. The sight of the girl's pale, lovely face, the pleading look in her eyes, and the touch of her soft dark hair, which, loosened by the wind, blew in rich tresses against his shoulder,

proved almost too much for his self-control. He had to set his teeth hard to keep back the wild words of love and passion which rose instinctively to his lips.

"I will hold you, my child," he said at last. "If there is any comfort for you in my presence, I promise you that we will die together."

"Oh, but you must not die!" she cried, in sudden dismay. "There, I was only thinking of myself again! You are so strong; without me, you might be able to swim, and keep yourself afloat. I have been nothing but a drag and a burden to you all my life. First, I spoilt your holiday; and then, Gerald,—I must tell you now,—I guessed your secret. I know that you gave up your love because you would not break your word to the little waif you had taken out of the gutter. I know what you had to bear when Sir Rawdon carried her off before your eyes. I have brought you nothing but pain and suffering; and now, for my sake, you are in peril of your life! I am a regular Jonah, and you had better drop me overboard before I do you any more mischief."

The effect of this speech on Gerald was to make his hand tremble so much on the helm that the boat swerved in her course, and in a moment a white-crested billow came foaming over the gunwale. Winifred sprang to the pump, standing knee-deep in water; and, inwardly cursing his carelessness, Gerald's hand tightened like a vice upon the helm, and again the *Petrel* flew onward, rising like a bird to each successive wave, while behind her towered a huge curling billow ever following, as if it must fall and crush the little boat under its relentless might.

The red line faded in the west: night, black and tempestuous, swept down upon the stormy sea, and still the *Petrel* flew before the gale, while, silent and watchful, Gerald kept his post in the stern. With considerable difficulty,

Winifred contrived to light and adjust the lamps, and having again taken a turn at the pump, she sat down to rest for a moment at Gerald's feet, and looked up into his grave, stern face, over which the flickering light was casting strange gleams and shadows.

"Are you angry with me for what I said?" she asked piteously.

"Angry? no, little one," and he smiled the bright sweet smile which softened all his face, and Winifred liked best to see; "though I positively forbid you ever to talk such nonsense again. You know well enough you are the sunshine of my life. But now, we must really not be sentimental any longer. You are forgetting one of the first rules at sea, 'Do not speak to the man at the wheel.'"

"I will feed him instead," she said, springing up, with a relieved laugh. "Do you know," and she looked at her watch, "it is eight o'clock, and I had ordered such a nice dinner for you to-night. It is a shame that you should be reduced to Osborne biscuits. I wonder, Gerald, where we shall have our next meal?"

Whether from her companion's words, or the mere rebound of her elastic temperament, the girl's spirits had risen with a rush. She laughed and chattered gaily as she dived into the locker after the Huntley and Palmer tin, and Gerald being unable to free his hands from sheet or helm, the consumption of the biscuits proved an operation from which they both derived considerable amusement, as Winifred fed the steersman with alternate bits of biscuit and sips of brandy-and-water, standing over him, when she did not lose her balance, with great determination, until he had disposed of what she considered a proper amount of food, utterly scouting his suggestion that they ought to limit themselves to half-rations.

"How can you steer the boat all night with nothing to

eat?" she asked. "We are sure to be able to land in the morning, or find some ship to pick us up, unless we go to the bottom; in which case we may just as well eat the biscuits ourselves, instead of leaving them for the fishes." And to this conclusive argument Gerald yielded at discretion.

There was no rest for either of the occupants of the boat. As the night wore on, clouds of spray broke over them, and Winifred had to labour almost incessantly at the pump to keep the water down; while Gerald, who dared not move, became nearly frozen at his post by the helm. Yet they laughed and joked, making light of their discomforts: the girl determined to hide her utter weariness from her companion, while nothing would induce Gerald to admit how cold and cramped he felt.

The hours wore on, and still the wind roared and a patter of raindrops mingled with the cold hiss of the spray, as the *Petrel* fled before the storm; and still Gerald's hand was steady on the helm, for he knew that Death rode behind them on the white crest of the pursuing wave, and that a single falter on his part would precipitate their doom. And, in spite of the cold and pain and peril, he was happy, glorying in the consciousness that his arm was shielding Winifred, and that whatever might befall them the same fate must meet the two; while the girl, tired and sleepy, tugging valiantly at the brass handle of the pump, which seemed to grow heavier and heavier in her grasp, kept glancing from time to time at Gerald with a blissful sense of security that she was in his keeping, instead of safe on land in the power of her dreaded father. Truly Love is a strange magician, and the spirit sometimes laughs the flesh to scorn.

The slow hours of the night crept by, and still the gallant little boat held on her way through the raging seas; but the gale showed no signs of abating, and another fear began to invade Gerald's mind. Unless the wind had veered, their

course must be taking them directly across Channel; and, by a rough calculation of the *Petrel's* speed, he dreaded that daylight might find them within sight of the French coast. Were they to be spared through the perils of the deep, only to be flung, a helpless wreck, upon the Normandy rocks? A joyous exclamation from Winifred disturbed his gloomy thoughts.

"Gerald, it is really getting light. The day is coming at last!"

And slowly, through the clouds and blinding rain-mists, the cold grey dawning stole over the sea, and every time the boat rose on a wave Gerald strained his eyes forward in a vain endeavour to pierce the dim-veiled distance.

"Go for'ard, and try if you can see anything, child," he said at last. "I'll call you back to the pump when necessary."

"Why, what can there be to see?" asked Winifred, in surprise; but Gerald made no answer. She thought he did not hear the question, and the wind carried off her voice when she tried to repeat it from her position in the bows.

For some minutes she gazed intently forward into the grey, swirling mists. The light was growing rapidly, but the rain drove in her eyes, and she shielded them with her hand, wondering what it could be that Gerald expected her to see in this waste of clouds and waters; but any object would be a welcome change. Oh, how weary she was of the incessant motion and the sharp hiss of the spray across the bows, the wet, the cold, the hunger!—for it was nearly twelve hours since the *Petrel* had sailed out of the bay. She felt so worn-out and stupefied that she fell into a sort of dream as she stood clinging to the mast, her brown eyes wide open and fixed straight before her; when suddenly she roused herself with a start. Was it a trick of her fancy, or were her eyes playing her false, that the mists seemed to thicken and

darken, as if a thunder-cloud had descended right in the *Petrel's* course? The next moment, with a cry of terror, she flew to Gerald's side.

"The cliffs!" she cried. "Go about; we are right upon them!"

But even as the words left her lips, the *Petrel's* keel crashed down upon a rock, and heeling over with the shock, the water rushed in over the gunwale.

Winifred felt Gerald's arm thrown round her, the icy chill of the water as it closed over her head, and then with a tumultuous, deafening roar, as if the whole ocean were pouring over a cataract into a gulf below, she seemed caught up and swept away in the maddening rush and whirl.

CHAPTER XV.

Notre Dame de Compassion.



HEN Winifred's senses began to return, she had a very curious dream. She thought that burning kisses were pressed upon her lips, and that a voice was crying, "My darling! speak to me!"

in such accents of anguish and despair that she roused herself with a start. But when she opened her eyes there was only Gerald standing over her. So it must have been a dream, for Gerald never called her "darling," nor kissed her, except in careless, brotherly fashion. Yet his face looked so white and strange, it frightened her. There was a deep red mark on his forehead, and his fair hair was soaked with blood that was slowly trickling from a cut at the side of his head.

"Gerald, you are hurt! What has happened?" she cried in terror. And then, to her intense amazement, Gerald covered his eyes with his hand, and she heard the sound of a great strangling sob.

"Thank God!" he murmured. "Child, I thought you were dead!"

He moved his hand and looked down at her with a smile. His face was calm, and radiant with a shining light of happiness; but its death-like pallor alarmed Winifred even more than his unusual emotion.

Raising herself on her elbow, she looked round her, and in an instant recollection returned. She was lying on the sand at the foot of a cliff, her hair and clothes dripping with water; while at only a few yards' distance huge breakers were thundering on the rocks; salt spray, mixed with

rain and mist, was blowing up the beach; and great foam-flakes, like driven snow, laid their cold kisses on her cheeks.

"I remember now,—we were wrecked. Gerald, you have been hurt in saving me."

"It's nothing," he answered lightly. "Tell me, little one; are you all right? Can you stand?"

"Of course I can." She rose, a trifle unsteadily, and stood holding to the cliff. "I am not a bit the worse, only it is very cold;" and in spite of herself, her teeth chattered, and she shivered from head to foot.

"We will soon remedy that," and he put his left arm round her waist. "Try to walk, and we will find a path up the cliff."

Winifred took a few steps forward, and then stopped with an exclamation of dismay. Tossed up upon the beach lay broken planks, a piece of the mast, and fragments of the gear of a boat.

"It is not the *Petrel*?" she cried piteously. "Oh, Gerald! she has not been knocked to pieces like that—your lovely boat?"

"It is my poor old *Petrel*," he said; "but she has done good service, Mignonette. Don't cry for her, child. I could not have wished her a better fate than to founder in saving her mistress."

But the tears rushed to Winifred's eyes and streamed through her dark lashes.

"And we shall never sail in her again! No other boat can be the same. Think of the happy times we have had in her, and the dear old bay without the *Petrel* under the rocks. Oh, Gerald, it is so sad! I told you I brought you nothing but misfortunes."

"But, my dear little girl, you are safe, which is the main point; and I assure you it is little short of a miracle that we have escaped with our lives."

"Tell me what happened," she said, checking her tears as she caught an accent of distress in his voice. "And do let me tie up that cut on your head. You say it is nothing, but I believe it is hurting you a great deal."

Winifred was quite herself by this time ; and, disregarding Gerald's protestations, she made him sit down on a rock and submit to have his handkerchief torn into strips, the blood washed from his hair, and his wound bandaged : her little fingers performing the operation with such gentle dexterity that he hardly felt their touch.

"Now you shall have half my handkerchief to use," she said, stepping back and regarding her work with evident satisfaction ; "it is too small to make a bandage ;" and, tearing the dainty bit of cambric in two, she offered him the larger half. "Gerald," she said suddenly, as he took it with his left hand, "what is the matter with your right arm ? It is hanging down in such a curious way."

"It is rather numb ; I got a blow on the rocks. Come on, child, we must really try and find some house to go to. Never mind me. I am all right, now I know that you are safe. It gave me a horrid turn, seeing you lie there looking just like death ; it seemed hours before you came round."

"I don't remember anything about it. How did we get ashore ?"

"We were caught and rolled in on the crest of a wave ; my feet touched the bottom when it dropped us, but we were sucked back in the wash. Then another came thundering on our heads and carried us still further up the beach, only we were again sucked back into the surf. I can't tell you how long the joke went on. At last I came down on a rock, and hung on like grim death till the wave went back without us. Then I made a dash for it, and by the time the next one came tearing in we were too far up to be caught back by the wash. It was a nasty feeling being tossed about as the

plaything of those enormous rollers. I was thankful you were unconscious, Mignonette."

"I am glad I was. I suppose I was stunned. It must have been horrid struggling with the waves; and what a nuisance I must have been to you. Why didn't you let me go, Gerald? Then it would have all been over, and you would have had no more bother with me."

"And such a satisfactory ending to our adventure!" said Gerald, in his driest tone, as they walked along the sand.

They did not proceed very far before discovering a path up the cliffs, which Winifred ascended with light eager steps, full of interest and curiosity in her new surroundings.

"To be really in France," she said; "but the cliffs look very much like England, except that they are yellow. Are you sure it is France, Gerald?"

Receiving no answer, she turned to repeat the question, and was alarmed to see Gerald stagger, as he paused, panting for breath, half-way up the steep path. His face was deadly pale, and he winced a little as the girl flew back to him, taking his arm to support him, and she hastily moved to the other side.

"Gerald, what is it? I know you are very bad, and you are trying to hide it from me," she cried breathlessly.

"It is nothing much," he said, with a faint smile. "My arm pains me a little, and I am rather used up, that's all. I shall be as fit as anything when I have had a rest. Yes, give me your arm, little girl. Now keep a bright look out, and we will invade the first habitation we approach, be it castle, farm, or cottage."

His manner slightly reassured Winifred, although she felt decidedly uneasy at his continued pallor, and the look of suffering in his eyes. To her intense relief, she soon discerned a building before them, which proved to be a low

tiled farmhouse. Crossing the yard towards the open door, Winifred glanced in dismay at the uneven stone-floor of the kitchen, over which a litter of young pigs and some mangy-looking fowls were indiscriminately ranging. The further end of the room was more inviting, as a cheerful wood-fire blazed on the huge hearth, and a fragrant odour of coffee floated on the air. As Winifred hesitated on the threshold, an inner door opened, and a woman appeared, good-tempered looking and buxom, with bare feet thrust into *sabots*, and a white Normandy cap on her head. She was accompanied by a dog, which sprang forward barking at the strangers, whom its mistress eyed in open wonder. In a few words Winifred explained their situation, to which the good woman listened in amazed commiseration, throwing up her eyes and hands, and ejaculating "*Mon Dieu! mon Dieu! mon Dieu!*" till Winifred really thought she would never stop. She bustled about, however, placing her visitors in the warmest corner by the fire, and setting forth, at the end of the long bare table, china bowls, a huge loaf of rye bread, honey, cheese, eggs—everything her house could produce; while her husband came in, and began chatting to the strangers. The old grandmother took up her seat and knitting in the opposite chimney-corner, and one little round-headed child after another descended the ladder-like stairs, and stood staring at *les Anglais*, with their fingers in their mouths. Winifred felt quite at her ease; she was delighted to discover that she could understand the somewhat provincial French, and she did full justice to the provisions and the steaming *café au lait*, which she assured the hostess was the best she had ever tasted. She would have been perfectly happy if she had not seen with what an effort Gerald joined in the conversation, and that he made a mere pretence of eating—drinking his coffee, but apparently unable to swallow anything else. His first question had been to inquire the

name of the nearest town, and Winifred saw a look of relief pass over his face as he heard the answer, "St. Etienne, monsieur."

"Then we must be near the convent of La Ferrière?"

"Monsieur was right; the convent was only five kilometres distant. Was monsieur then acquainted with *le bon père*? Ah! what a man; he was a veritable saint from heaven."

"Yes, monsieur had the honour of the good father's acquaintance, and he would like mademoiselle, his sister, to visit La Ferrière. Would it be possible to procure a conveyance?"

The farmer seemed doubtful.

"There was only his cart," he said, "which was hardly fitting for mademoiselle;" and he glanced at Winifred, who in her torn, dripping clothes, hatless and gloveless, looked every inch a lady.

"That will do perfectly, if you will have the kindness to lend it to us," replied Gerald; and then he turned to Winifred, saying in English: "We are in luck, little one. Do you remember my telling you last year about our visit to La Ferrière, and that charming old Abbé Connois? I heard no end about him from Norton, and he invited me to come and see him again whenever I was in the neighbourhood, so I have no doubt he will take pity on us now. I was thinking of applying to him in any case when I found we were in Normandy, though I had not an idea we were so near."

"I remember, he has a sort of asylum for incurables."

"Yes, for all the sick people the hospitals won't keep. You and I don't quite come under that category, but he takes invalid priests, reduced ladies, and anybody who needs a shelter, so I am sure he won't refuse us."

Winifred made no reply; she would have preferred keeping her distance from such a place, as she had a nervous dread of spectacles of disease and horror; but Gerald

seemed so pleased at finding himself in the neighbourhood of La Ferrière that she refrained from expressing her opinion.

The farmer brought round his horse and cart; and Winifred, thoroughly warmed and refreshed in spite of her wet clothes, mounted at Gerald's bidding to the seat beside the driver. The road proved very rough, the cart was innocent of springs, and the girl had enough to do to hold on as they jolted through the ruts, though she exchanged at intervals spasmodic remarks with the farmer. The mist had cleared off, the wind was falling, and the rain only came in light showers. Winifred could not see much of the country, as the road followed the line of cliffs; but she caught glimpses of swelling green hills, a picturesque village, and fields with cattle grazing, interspersed with strips of cultivated land, while they met several groups of peasants—the men in clean blouses, the women in white caps—evidently on their way to church.

"How very early everybody gets up in France," she said, glancing round at Gerald; "it is only seven o'clock now."

She did not catch his answer, but she wondered why his face was turned so persistently away from her. What could he find to look at in that grey, stormy sea? Once, when the cart gave a very bad lurch, she thought she heard him moan; but he replied so promptly when she spoke to him that she fancied she must have been mistaken. Presently they passed through a gate, and the farmer informed her they were now in the Ferrière property. Winifred looked out eagerly, but only saw more cultivated ground, more fields and cattle, until the farmer pointed with his whip to a huge grey building half hidden in trees.

"There is the convent, mademoiselle. I cannot drive you to the door, for no men are permitted to enter; but you see that small house there on the right. That is where the good

father receives his visitors. *Bon jour, ma sœur !*" and he lifted his hat to a sister who passed them wearing the brown Franciscan habit, with its becoming white headdress under the black veil, and who gazed with natural curiosity at the shipwrecked strangers.

They met more sisters as they approached the house, and young girls in uniform dress—"the orphans," as the farmer told Winifred—and in a few minutes more they drew up before a substantial-looking house, only small in comparison to the palatial proportions of the convent.

Their approach had been observed, and as Winifred sprang to the ground there stepped from the door a tall, stately woman, wearing the Franciscan dress, with fine features and magnificent dark eyes, whom the farmer greeted as "*ma mère*," with his very lowest bow. She was so stately and dignified that Winifred, who was not usually addicted to shyness, looked round to seek Gerald's protection, and discovered, to her horror, that, white to the very lips, and evidently almost fainting, he was being assisted from the cart by the farmer. He tried to smile as he met her frightened looks.

"It is nothing, little one; I am rather faint, that's all. Excuse me, madame," and he bowed to the Superior. "My sister and I have been wrecked upon the coast, and have come to beg the hospitality of Monsieur le Père Connois."

The moment the splendid eyes rested on Gerald they softened into such a look of sympathy and pity that Winifred lost her fear of the Superior in a moment.

"Ah! monsieur, but what madness," she said in a sweet, low voice, "to have driven from Perron's farm in that rough cart with a broken arm!"

"*Broken!*" cried Winifred in horror. "Oh, Gerald, why didn't you tell me, and I would have gone to fetch a doctor?"

"I wanted to bring you here," he said. "Now I know you are safe," and with a contented air he resigned himself to be led into the house, and laid, wrapt in blankets, on a bed, while the Superior despatched a messenger for the doctor, then fortunately visiting some patients in the convent.

"My child, you must not stay here in your wet clothes," she said to Winifred, who was gazing in deep distress at Gerald's white face and closed eyes. "I think you had better come away before the doctor arrives."

"Oh, please, please, let me stay!" pleaded Winifred, clasping her hands. "I can't go, indeed, till I know how he is."

"Go and change your things," said Gerald with unexpected authority, suddenly opening his eyes. "I shall be all right when this bothering arm is set; and if madame permits," he continued in French, "you may come and see me for a minute when the doctor has gone."

Winifred attempted no further remonstrance, and meekly followed the Superior to another room, where she was furnished with some under-garments, which seemed very singular to her English ideas—a black skirt and bodice and a red shawl. It was a large, bright room, with a stained-floor, a spotless white bed and curtains, highly-polished furniture, and a marble wash-stand supplied with every toilet requisite, even to a new tooth-brush. Winifred dressed herself quickly, and then, wrapping the shawl round her, opened the window and leaned out. The sun had dispersed the rain clouds, and was shining royally on wet glistening grass and trees, while the wind had sunk to a breeze laden with the fresh sweet breath of spring, and bearing to the girl's ears the songs of lark and thrush, and the distant chime of bells. On the broad terrace beneath her window several old people had crept out to warm themselves in

the sun, and from the garden she could hear the merry voices of children at play; but Winifred was almost indifferent to her surroundings. Her whole soul was absorbed in the thought of Gerald, and of what might be passing in his room. It was hard to be shut out, and leave him to the care of strangers; but then—to see him suffer; she shuddered at the thought. Oh! why had not the injury befallen her? She could have borne any torture with her hand in his, and his grey eyes upon her face. Why should all the pain and suffering fall on him? Was she never to have the opportunity of fulfilling her childish vow? She watched the sweet face and spare figure of a sister crossing the terrace; she looked round the room, from the crucifix over the bed, at the pictures of saint and martyr, to the fine print of the Crucifixion over the mantelpiece. Everything breathed of renunciation and self-sacrifice; and clasping her hands, and bowing her head in the April sunshine, Winifred renewed her vow—that come what might of weal or woe, Gerald's good and happiness should stand to her above all earthly things.

Tears came at last to relieve her suspense and strain, and the girl was quietly crying when the expected knock sounded at the door. She sprang to her feet, struggling for composure, and in another minute was by Gerald's side. A little colour had come into his pale face, and he smiled as his eyes met Winifred's anxious glance.

"My poor little girl, what an ass I have been to go frightening you like this. I am all right, really; it was nothing so very bad. Now you must go to bed, and to sleep; only will you do one thing for me first?" and he looked up at her with a gleam of genuine amusement in his eyes.

"Anything, Gerald."

"Well, then, assure these good people that I am really

not in the habit of wearing a nightcap, and shall not take my death of cold without it. I have been using every argument I could think of, but I am horribly afraid they will put it on by main force, as I have only one arm to defend myself."

And Winifred's tears ended in a fit of laughter, which considerably astonished the worthy mother and doctor. They thought her hysterical, and escorted her back to her own room, where the girl's mirth broke out afresh at discovering a clean white nightcap laid out for her upon the bed. Relieved of her anxiety about Gerald, she was not long in becoming aware of her own fatigue and sleepiness; and it did not need the hot-spiced drink, which a sister brought her as soon as she was in bed, to send her off into a sound, dreamless sleep.

It was late in the afternoon before she woke, to find her own clothes, neatly brushed and dried, laid out on a chair beside her; and she was scarcely dressed in them before a sister entered with a steaming bowl of coffee, to know if mademoiselle would like some dinner, or would wait for the supper at seven.

"I will wait, please," said Winifred. "May I go to my brother? Is he awake?"

"Yes, monsieur had been up a long time; he was now in the little *salle à manger* talking to the *père*, who had said that mademoiselle was to join them when she was ready."

And having burnt her throat with the coffee in her haste, Winifred was ushered into a small room on the floor below, where, to her intense amazement, she saw Gerald sitting up in an arm-chair, his coat, with the right sleeve pinned over his shoulder, and his injured arm supported by a sling, entirely muffled in a shawl.

"Gerald, how very wrong of you! Whatever made you get up?" she cried, gazing at him in such consternation as

to be quite unaware for the moment of the presence of another person in the room.

Gerald laughed.

"Why, child, did you think I was going to lie in bed for a knock on my arm? Now let me introduce to you Monsieur le Père Connois. This, monsieur, is my little sister, Winifred."

And the girl became suddenly conscious of a slight white-haired man, in the black *soutane* and *berretta* of a priest, advancing towards her, with a quiet dignity of demeanour, which, in spite of his short stature, endowed him with an air of authority and command that impressed Winifred not a little. He took her hand, addressing her in fluent English:

"Welcome to La Ferrière, my child. I have been hearing from your brother an account of your strange adventures."

"Thank you," she answered shyly; and then, her anxiety for Gerald overcoming her awe, she went on earnestly: "Is it not wrong of him to have got up? He ought to stay in bed, ought he not, monsieur?" and she looked appealingly at the priest's pale, worn face and dark, sunken eyes.

The Abbé smiled—a smile which won the girl's confidence at once. It was so full of human sympathy, not unmixed with a touch of quiet humour.

"Ought, mademoiselle, does not go far with a wilful man. A Frenchman with a broken arm would, without doubt, consider himself an invalid. An Englishman!" and he shrugged his shoulders, "how may one answer for the freaks of your brave determined countrymen? Still, I trust Mr. Daubeny may find no ill effects from his rashness. He has no fever at present, and he declares he will become feverish if we keep him in bed."

"I am all right," said Gerald decidedly. "The fact is, Mignonette, I am anxious about the mother, and I want to get back to her as soon as possible. Now sit down, little one, I have a great deal to tell you."

"If you will excuse me," said the Abbé, "I will leave you .

together. *Au revoir*, monsieur; we shall meet, I trust, at supper."

He bowed, and left the room; and Winifred, seizing a footstool, placed himself in her old childish position at Gerald's feet, resting her clasped hands on his knee.

"What have you to tell me?" she asked eagerly, looking with earnest eyes into his grave face.

"Little one," and his left hand was laid fondly on her dark hair, "have you been thinking over your future life? You have had a sharp enough uprooting, my poor little Mignonette."

"What do you mean?" and startled by his significant tone, the girl looked up with frightened eyes. "Am I not going back to Beechhaven, Gerald?"

"How can you, my child, unless you are willing to be handed over to your father? Don't you know that the law gives him power to claim you? You can only escape him by living in hiding."

"Away from you and mother? Oh, Gerald, I would rather die!"

"But, Mignonette, it is only for a time. As soon as you are one-and-twenty, you can come back to us as your own mistress."

"But I shall not be seventeen till next month; and four years is a lifetime."

"It won't seem so very long, and perhaps I may be able to make terms with your father when he finds you are not forthcoming. Courage, child, there is no knowing what may happen; and I promise you your life shall not be utterly miserable while I have the disposing of it."

"I don't care what happens to me if I am away from Beechhaven," said Winifred in a low, weary tone.

"Oh, yes, you will. We can write to each other, you know; and, perhaps, sometimes I can run over and see you, only I shall have to be very careful, because they are certain
• to watch me. I am sure you will be happy here, my Nixie?"

"Here?" cried Winifred, looking up in amazement.

"The Abbé has offered to take charge of you, and you will be perfectly safe, for no strangers are admitted into the grounds unless they are friends of the Abbé. If I placed you with a family, I should be in constant dread of your being discovered and carried off. He says there is a first-rate artist at St. Etienne, who can come over and give you lessons, so I hope you will be quite happy, little girl. I am sure they will all be good to you here."

"But, Gerald, won't father be very angry with you for hiding me?" asked Winifred after a pause.

"I have no manner of doubt he will," and Gerald laughed triumphantly.

"Well, might he not come again with those dreadful men, and do something to you?"

"Not he; the law would be down on him then, and he is not a man to get himself into trouble. Set your mind at rest, child; he will pay no more visits to Beechhaven so long as you are out of the house."

They went on talking, Winifred urging all the objections she could think of to the plan, which Gerald quietly demolished; and at last she was forced unwillingly to admit that he was in the right, and that no better hiding-place could be found for her than the Convent of Notre Dame de Compassion at La Ferrières.

"There is only one thing, child," he said quietly. "I don't want to put any constraint upon you; but, with all due respect to the good father and sisters, I should be sorry if they made a convert of you. That sort of thing is all very well in France; but, depend upon it, there is nothing comes up to our dear old Church at home."

"I won't do anything you don't like," said Winifred, with quivering lips. "And you will come over and see me?"

"As soon as I can with safety; and now, little one, I must say good-bye almost directly. I am off to catch the night boat from Dieppe."

"To-night! You are not fit to travel."

"Yes, I want to get back to the mother. She will be so anxious; and, besides, a man with only one available arm is decidedly out of place in other people's houses. They have patched me up to perfection; the *père* is going to lend me a cloak, and I shall buy a hat in St. Etienne."

Seeing he had decided on the journey, Winifred attempted no further remonstrance. At one blow all the sunshine seemed to be vanishing from her life; but having made up her mind to what was plainly inevitable, she would not distress Gerald by useless complainings, and tried her best to be bright and hopeful as she charged him with messages for Mrs. Daubeny and her other Beechhaven friends. Yet it was a very pale, pitiful little face that appeared at supper between him and the Abbé; and when the moment of his departure arrived, try as she would, Winifred could not keep back her tears.

"Good-bye, my child; I will come and see you as soon as I can," said Gerald, stooping to kiss the soft cheek turned up to him so confidingly. "Try and be happy, and do what the good *père* tells you. God bless you, little one!" but as he placed the girl's hand in that of his friend the Abbé, his heart misgave him, lest those clear child eyes should never again look up at him with that implicit love and trust. He was leaving her a child in her unshaken innocence and faith; he knew that she would have passed the mystic gates, and become a woman, ere they met again.

"Farewell, Daubeny; I will be faithful to the trust you have reposed in me *in every particular*," said the Abbé significantly.

And Winifred afterwards wondered what he could have

meant by the peculiar emphasis he laid upon the three last words ; but at the time she could only stand and sob, dashing the tears from her eyes, that she might catch Gerald's parting smile and wave of his hand as he drove away.

" We will do our best to make you happy, my child," said the Abbé gently, as he led her back into the house ; " but I do not wonder you grieve to part with your friend. I feel it an honour to have made the acquaintance of a man so brave and true."

CHAPTER XVI.

For Contempt of Court.



T was not long before Winifred began to feel at home amid her strange surroundings. At first she missed Gerald, Mrs. Daubeny, and the Beechhaven life every minute of the day, but she could not be insensible to the kindness with which she was treated, and she was not without interest and amusement in the novelty of her new abode. From the first, *la petite demoiselle Anglaise* was regarded as the pet and plaything of the house. The sisters waited on her hand and foot, partly because she was a stranger and their guest, but chiefly because they were charmed by her pretty face and winning manner.

They rose at four in the morning to pursue their work and devotions, but Winifred was brought her coffee in bed at eight o'clock. They nursed the sick, taught the orphan children, worked in the laundry, kitchen, garden, and even in the fields. She was expected to do nothing but amuse herself in the grounds or sit at her drawing, so long as she appeared duly at twelve and seven to take her meals with the Abbé and any other visitors staying in the house. It was, however, scarcely in Winifred's nature to enact the part of drone in a hive. She spent a good many hours in painting, for the teaching of her new master, M. Hervé, was a revelation to her, and she made surprising progress; but she found ample time to visit the convent, enliven the patients and old people by her bright talk, and sometimes relieve one of the sisters by taking entire charge

of a class of little ones. The sisters were as careful of her as if she were a princess; and, discovering her nervous temperament, they guarded her sedulously from unpleasant sights or sounds amongst the epileptic and cancer cases. Winifred was fairly amazed at their cheerful contentment and gentle patience with refractory invalids and troublesome children.

"It seems to me a terrible life," she wrote to Gerald, "even though they are not *cloîtrées*. Imagine getting up at four o'clock, and working hard from morning to night, by your own choice; and they take it all as a matter of course, and are perfectly happy and contented. You never see a long face or hear a word of cant; but, oh dear, the things they believe! The absurd stories about St. Francis; although they certainly do carry out his ideas with regard to animals. There is a puppy which has been brought up by a cat, romping with its foster-kitten on the terrace under my window at this moment; and the horses, oxen, and donkeys for the farm-work seem to live in veritable clover. They are wonderfully dear, good people; but you need never be afraid of my going over to a Church which seriously teaches that statues of the Virgin trot about in the night if they don't fancy the position in which they are placed, and that every time you enter a chapel dedicated to St. Francis you receive absolution for the next sin you may chance to commit. As you can fancy, the sisters are always making private excursions to the chapel; but I hardly think the *père* can really believe it all. He is a charming old man, so kind and calm; and yet he rules the whole place with a rod of iron, and the sisters are quite afraid of him, though they almost worship him. They say he was very rich, and gave every penny he possessed to founding La Ferrière. I wonder who he was? He does speak such good English, that I doubt if he can be altogether French. I have sometimes fancied—don't laugh, Gerald—that there is a like-

ness between him and Sir Rawdon. It struck me almost from the first, and every day I seem to see it plainer ; yet they are quite different in every way. It is as if there were some relationship between them. Do you think Sir Rawdon could have had any French connections through his mother's family ? I dare not ask the *père* ; he is the last person in the world with whom to take a liberty. Here comes Sœur Melanie with my bowl of afternoon milk, and she wants my letter to post ; so I must stop. Oh, if I could only fly over to make tea for you and mother ! But I am as happy at La Ferrière as I could be anywhere away from Beechhaven."

Every precaution was taken to preserve the secret of the girl's hiding-place. Her letters were enclosed by the Abbé to a priest in London, who forwarded them to Beechhaven ; and Mrs. Daubeny's letters to Winifred passed also through his hands. Gerald, of course, could not write to her himself, and Winifred had to be content with his messages through Mrs. Daubeny. She was told that his arm was progressing as favourably as possible, and that he found plenty to do, although forced to be absent on sick-leave from the bank. But as the weeks passed on, she wondered that he said nothing of coming over to see her. She made anxious inquiries of the sisters as to how long a broken arm would take to heal, but she only received the unsatisfactory reply that it all depended on circumstances. At last, one day she waylaid the doctor, and learned that, unless unforeseen complications had occurred, Mr. Daubeny's arm must certainly be well enough by that time to hold a pen. "Unforeseen complications!" Winifred pondered over the mysterious phrase. She was quite sure that Gerald would write to her as soon as he was able ; therefore something unforeseen must have happened, and she wrote off an imploring letter to Mrs. Daubeny begging to be told the truth.

After considerable delay, she received a short note from Gerald :

" My dear little Girl,—My arm is still very stiff. I am forbidden to write much, and have arrears of business to get through; so I can only send you a line to thank you for your jolly letters, which I enjoy most awfully, and only wish I could answer as I should like, but it is impossible. The mother's love and mine.

" Yours ever,

" GERALD DAUBENY."

On this note Winifred lived in perfect contentment, until, in course of time, she received another equally short and hurried. She had given up expecting Gerald now before his holiday, which he usually took in September or October, and waited patiently through the summer months, until early in September she was terribly disappointed by learning from Mrs. Daubeny that Gerald would have no holiday that autumn.

" Having been absent so long on sick-leave," wrote Mrs. Daubeny, " I fear there is no chance of his getting away again."

Winifred thought this very strange. Gerald had always occupied a somewhat privileged position at the bank, being granted a much longer holiday than the other clerks, and occasional leave of absence for hunting or shooting. Surely, she thought, if he asked for it, he could get away for two or three days, just to come and see her. Perhaps he did not care for the trouble. A pang shot through the girl's heart, and a shade of constraint marked her next letter. She had now been nearly six months at the convent, and she was growing painfully homesick, frequently going down to the shore, to which the convent grounds extended, and crying quietly to herself as she looked across the sea in the direction of the English coast. Oh, if she had only wings to fly to Beechhaven and see for herself that her dear ones were safe

and well ; for, in spite of her pique at Gerald's non-appearance, down at the bottom of her heart something told her that he would have come to her if he could.

One day at the beginning of November, as she brooded over the subject, a sudden thought struck her, but it seemed so horrible that she recoiled from it in dismay. People who broke the law were punished. She supposed Gerald was breaking the law in hiding her from her father, but surely nothing could be done to him ? There was no rest for Winifred until this question was answered. She flew straight to the Abbé's room, a sanctum to which only the heads of the convent were supposed to penetrate, and knocked boldly at the door. Receiving permission to enter, she advanced into the small, plainly-furnished room, where the priest looked up from a table strewn with letters and papers.

"Ah ! it is you, my child ;" and, rising with a bow, he offered his visitor a chair. " You wish to speak to me ? "

" If you please, *mon père*, will you tell me—I have only just thought of it—no harm can come to Mr. Daubeny for refusing to give me up ? He told me my father could do nothing, but I never thought of the law."

The Abbé looked gravely at the bright, eager face, as Winifred, too excited to take the offered chair, stood regarding him with flushed cheeks and shining eyes.

" What has put this idea into your head ? " he said. " You have had no bad news from Beechhaven ? "

" No ; but it is strange that my brother does not come to see me, and I think Mrs. Daubeny's letters sound as if she were keeping something back, and she hardly ever mentions Gerald now. Oh, *mon père !*" and Winifred clasped her hands imploringly, " I beg of you to tell me the truth. They have not been punishing Gerald for saving me ? "

" Put all such ideas out of your head, *petite*. He will come to see you before long, I promise you."

A quiet smile accompanied the words; but the girl was far from satisfied with the evasive answer.

"You will not tell me?" she pleaded. "Monsieur, I would go back to my father this moment if I thought they could do anything to Gerald for refusing to give me up. I must find out! oh, I must! I cannot rest until I know!"

"Be content, my child. Mr. Daubeny has his own reasons for what he has done. If you wish to please him, you will be patient, and look forward to his future visit. And now I fear I must ask you to withdraw; I am writing important letters for the post."

Winifred bowed, and left the room without a word. She saw that, whatever there might be to tell, she would learn nothing from the impenetrable Abbé. In a moment her resolution was taken. It was only three o'clock in the afternoon; in another five minutes she was walking rapidly from the house in the direction of St. Etienne. She had never quitted the convent grounds since she had driven through the gates in the farmer's cart with Gerald, and she knew she would get into disgrace for venturing to the town without leave, and that it was a shocking impropriety in France for a young lady to walk out alone. Her anxiety, however, concerning Gerald overmastered all other considerations, and in less than an hour she had traversed the four kilometres to the town, and inquired her way to the house of her drawing-master, M. Hervé. She knew there was an English colony in St. Etienne, and she begged M. Hervé to tell her if there were an English lawyer, or anyone from whom she could obtain legal advice on a matter of great importance. She spoke with such quiet self-possession that he never doubted she must be there with the Abbé's permission, and was considerably astonished, on accompanying her into the street, to find that she was unattended by even a girl from the convent. He took her, however, to the solicitor's house, and remained

with her, feeling responsible for his pupil, while Winifred promptly explained her business to the lawyer.

"That is a most complicated question," he said, looking curiously at the girl's anxious face; "but in such a case as you describe, the guardian would be served with a writ of *habeas corpus*, and refusing to give up his ward, would be committed to prison for contempt of court."

"For how long?" asked Winifred, turning deadly pale, while she gazed at the lawyer with eyes of horror and dismay.

"During the pleasure of the Court."

"But if he afterwards gave up his ward?"

"If he purged his contempt by submission, he would either be let out at once, or as soon as the Court considered he had been sufficiently punished for his offence."

"Oh! please tell me what to do?" cried Winifred imploringly. "I will give myself up this minute, if they will only let him out."

The lawyer smiled. He was a shrewd-looking, sharp-eyed man, and gazed with evident interest at the pretty, pleading face.

"I must begin by asking your name," he said. "My good friend, M. Hervé, only introduced you as his English pupil." And he bowed to the artist, who, unable to comprehend a word of English, was watching Winifred's altered expression in natural amazement.

"It is Winifred Flowers," she said; "and my guardian, Mr. Daubeny, brought me to La Ferrière to hide from my father."

"Daubeny!" and the lawyer's face lighted up with sudden intelligence. "So you are the lost young lady? That is very interesting. The case has been in all the papers."

"I have seen no papers. Oh, please tell me what happened!"

"The trial came on last summer. I don't remember all the particulars, but I know Mr. Flowers made out an uncommonly strong case; swore he was in receipt of a comfortable income, and wished for his daughter to keep his house; denied that he had any intention of making her work, and insinuated all sorts of things against Mr. Daubeny, who simply refused to produce his ward, and was therefore committed to prison."

"Father can act anything," said Winifred, in despair. "If I had only known! Surely they will let Mr. Daubeny off at once, if I give myself up now?"

"I will see what can be done," said the lawyer, in a business-like tone. "You are willing, then, to give yourself up?"

"Yes, indeed; if they will set him free."

"Very well. I will make inquiries, and let you know the result."

"But I cannot stay on at La Ferrière now that I know the truth. I must go to England this very night; and I am afraid, if I return to the convent, the *père* may not let me go. He promised Mr. Daubeny to keep me;" and her eyes flashed as she remembered the priest's last words to Gerald, of which she now understood the significance only too well. They were all in league to keep her in the dark, and let Gerald make this terrible sacrifice on her account. She was a child no longer, and she was resolved to act for herself. "I have money enough for my ticket," she added, "and I think for your fee also, if you will kindly tell me what it is."

The lawyer smiled, and was silent for a moment. It flashed upon him that Mr. Flowers had offered a considerable sum for any information leading to the recovery of his daughter, and he began to see his way to making capital out of his wilful young client.

"I will go with you to England, Miss Flowers," he said at last, "and see what I can do in the affair. I know my wife

is anxious to run over to London; perhaps she may agree to start to-night, in which case she would be most happy to act as your *chaperon*. I will consult her about it."

He withdrew, and Winifred began explaining to bewildered M. Hervé the facts of her position, but long before she had succeeded in making them plain to his comprehension, the lawyer, Mr. Ashton, returned, accompanied by a fashionable-looking woman, of somewhat faded prettiness, which she carried off with considerable airs and graces. Addressing Winifred in a patronising manner, she dilated at some length on the inconvenience of a hurried journey. But when the girl frankly begged her not to take so much trouble on her account, Mrs. Ashton replied that she was ready to make the effort, and would start by the night train for Dieppe."

"Then you will see to my things being packed, my dear," said the lawyer hurriedly. "I must be off at once to La Ferrière to claim this young lady's luggage from the Abbé."

"Do you think I might go with you?" asked Winifred anxiously. "They have been so good to me, I cannot bear to run away without saying 'good-bye' to them all."

"Better not, Miss Flowers. The good father is monarch of all he surveys in his kingdom, and would probably put you under lock and key, while I could hardly defend you against the onslaught of the united sisterhood."

"Then I will write a note," said Winifred coldly, for she did not altogether approve of Mr. Ashton's tone. If anything less than Gerald's liberty had been at stake, she would have waited long indeed before quitting La Ferrierè to place herself under the protection of that sharp-featured, shrewd-eyed man.

With hands that trembled a little, she sat down to her task, briefly informing the Abbé that Mr. Ashton had promised to take her to England to procure Gerald Daubeny's release by her own surrender to her father. She thanked him and the good sisters with all her heart for the very great kindness

they had shown her, and deeply regretted that she could not return to bid them farewell, but she feared the *père* would not approve her resolution, and she felt her duty lay in an immediate return to England.

Armed with the note, the lawyer departed on his errand, but Winifred was granted no leisure to reflect on the important step she had taken; for M. Hervé had been invited to remain to dinner, and on realising the fact of his pupil's approaching departure, improved the time by imparting advice and directions for her future guidance and instruction, although several times interrupted by pathetic appeals from Mrs. Ashton for assistance and counsel in her preparations for the journey. Dinner was on the table when the lawyer returned, entering the room with a slightly disturbed expression.

"I have secured your luggage, Miss Flowers, but I am sorry to tell you I have brought the old gentleman too. He is a frightfully obstinate old fellow, and nothing I could say would induce him to stop at home. See you, he would; so I had to offer him a seat in my cab. Shall I come in and protect you?" as he saw a frightened look steal into the girl's face.

"No, thank you; I think I ought to see him alone," said Winifred firmly, but her heart beat rather quickly as she followed the lawyer to the room where the Abbé was awaiting her.

"So, my child, you propose taking a very important step," he said in his usual quiet tone, when Mr. Ashton had left him alone with Winifred. "I can understand that your first impulse is to effect Mr. Daubeny's release at all risks to yourself, but do you not think you owe something to your guardian's wishes? To obey is better than sacrifice."

"But, *mon père*, I cannot in this case," said the girl earnestly. "I am no longer a child, and I cannot allow Mr.

Daubeny to remain in prison on my account ; it is impossible, quite impossible."

"It is hard for you, I admit," said the Abbé ; "but I think, for Mr. Daubeny's sake, you ought to make up your mind to it. Consider how strongly he must feel the necessity for shielding you from your father, when in the first place he risks both your life and his own in placing you beyond the man's reach, and in the next undergoes a long imprisonment rather than reveal your hiding-place. He has now been nearly five months in prison ; sooner or later he is certain to be set at liberty, having voluntarily chosen to pay this price for your safety. If you now give yourself up, he will have the bitterness of feeling that his sacrifice has been made in vain. Surely you care sufficiently for him to wish to spare him from such a terrible blow ?"

"If I had only heard of it sooner," said Winifred, despairingly ; "but now that I know I must go to England, I cannot remain here in safety, and think of Gerald in prison when I might release him."

"I am not at all sure that you will release him. I am no lawyer, but I know something of Mr. Ashton, and must warn you against trusting his promises. He is a thoroughly unprincipled man, with whom his own interests are always his first consideration."

"Still, it is a chance, a hope. *Mon père*, you do not guess —no one can tell how good and noble Gerald is. He has given up for me one thing after another, since he first saved my life as a child ; and I—what have I done for him ? Nothing but bring him trouble and misfortune, until"—and a sob escaped her lips,—“until it comes to this. I could never hold up my head, or look his mother in the face again, if, now that I know, I allowed it to go on. All the sacrifice shall not be on his side. I am strong enough to meet my fate, whatever it may be. I will set him free, even against his will ; and

perhaps some day in the future — who knows? — I may be given the opportunity of showing how I — worship him."

She hid her face in her hands and sobbed, and the Abbé looked with grave, pitying eyes at the little impulsive, passionate girl, claiming a woman's responsibility, while every word breathed of the naive frankness and simplicity of childhood.

"I fear you will regret your decision when it is too late," he said impressively. "I do not speak to you of your own future, for I know you well enough to believe that is a small consideration in your eyes, compared with your duty to the Daubeny family: but I tell you plainly, it is idle to talk of gratitude, when you are deliberately disobeying Mr. Daubeny's commands. You are aware that he transferred his authority to me; and I, Winifred, bid you return with me to La Ferrière."

The girl checked her sobs, drew herself up to her full height, and unshrinkingly met the firm gaze of the dark eyes fixed upon her.

"I am very sorry, *mon père*. You have been so good to me, indeed I would obey you if I could; but in this matter I must follow my own conscience. I cannot return with you to La Ferrière."

"Then go your own way," said the Abbé gravely, without a particle of anger in his tone. "I would have shielded you if I could. Child, I fear you will be led by rough paths until you learn that the secret of life lies not in struggle with, but in submission to, a Higher Will. Remember, my little daughter," he added in a different tone, "you have always a friend in the Abbé Connois, and that you leave warm hearts behind you at La Ferrière. *Au revoir*; I will not say adieu."

And as Winifred involuntarily bent her head before him,

he laid his right hand upon her soft dark hair, and murmured earnestly :

“*Que le bon Dieu vous garde, ma chère enfant, et je vous donne ma bénédiction.*”

He quitted the room, and Winifred found herself, for the first time in her life, left undisputed mistress of her own actions.

“But I must go—I must go,” she said feverishly, “even if Mephistopheles himself were waiting for me on the other side.”

CHAPTER XVII.

Winifred's Ordeal.



HE moment Winifred had fairly started on her journey, she fell a prey to growing terror of what probably lay before her. Her father's face, with its coarse cruel smile, seemed to gaze at her from the outside darkness, as the train sped onwards through the night, and her heart sank lower and lower while she responded to Mr. Ashton's commonplace remarks, and his wife's languid grumbling. She did not like her companions, and distrusted the lawyer's smooth civility; but she would have willingly prolonged the journey indefinitely, since every moment was bringing her nearer to her dreaded doom. When they reached the quay, and were going on board the Newhaven boat, for a moment her resolution faltered. She was leaving a life of safety, and of full opportunity of advancing in her chosen profession, for an existence which must prove a daily round of irksome toil and terror, and this against the wishes of her friends and with the certainty of rousing Gerald's anger by her disobedience. Her heart failed her at the thought; and stepping aside from the crowd hurrying to the gangway, she stood for a moment gazing over the moonlit harbour with eyes that saw nothing of the houses and shipping, the bustle on the quay, but pictured in unvarnished colours the miserable future, when, deserted by all her friends, she would be left defenceless at the mercy of her father's brutality and greed.

"If I fail in setting Gerald free, they will all think I only gave myself up from wilfulness, or because I was tired of La Ferrière," she thought with a sharp stab of pain. "The

good *père* was fair to me ; but other people will think me mad, if they do not think any worse. I can still go back,—in another minute, it will be too late."

Then, on the point of yielding, there rose before her the narrow bounds of a prison cell, and Gerald, with his active frame and love of outdoor exercise, pent in for weary months by frowning stone walls, and in an instant she felt that no sacrifice could be too great for the hope of bringing him freedom. To let Gerald, for her sake, remain in prison, when it lay in her power to set him free ! She felt angry with herself for even her momentary hesitation, and went firmly forward to the gangway, where she met Mr. Ashton coming back in search of her.

" My wife has taken a berth for you, Miss Flowers. This is the way to the saloon ;" and he did not leave the young lady until he had seen her safely established under Mrs. Ashton's eyes.

When the boat started, however, Winifred stole up for a few minutes on deck. She wanted to look again at the French coast which, after its first rough greeting, had afforded her such hospitable shelter. She felt sad at parting from the friends who had grown very dear to her during her long sojourn at La Ferrière, and tears filled her eyes as the steamer moved towards the harbour mouth. She wiped them away that she might watch the long line of cliffs stretching in the direction of La Ferrière : would she ever see the friendly grey house and its kindly inmates again ? Passing the pier head, where the great crucifix, grand and impressive in the moonlight, rose black against the sky, the girl bent her head with the murmured prayer that strength might be given her to imitate, in the widely different path she was called upon to tread, the sweet unselfishness of the sisters' simple lives.

It was a raw, cheerless morning when they reached Victoria. A yellow fog filled the station and hung over

the streets, which looked dreary and dismal as London streets usually do at eight o'clock on a November day. Driving to the Grand Hotel, where Mr. Ashton had telegraphed for rooms, they were soon at breakfast in the great dining-room. Winifred had been too excited to sleep on the journey, and could now eat nothing; but she looked so pretty with her shining eyes and the flush of nervous excitement on her cheeks, that many glances were turned towards the table where she was sitting with her two companions, and Mr. Ashton, noticing the attention she aroused, secretly congratulated himself on the course he had taken in the affair.

"Now, Miss Flowers," he said when breakfast was over, "if you will rest for an hour or two, I will be off to Lincoln's Inn, and see what can be done."

"Can't I go with you?" she asked eagerly. "I am not the least tired, and I do so want it settled at once."

"Have patience for a couple of hours. I must see first how the land lies, and I fear your presence would only cause delay," returned Mr. Ashton with decision, privately determined to secure the reward for himself before seeking an interview with Gerald Daubeny's solicitors.

Unwillingly Winifred agreed, and utterly refusing to follow Mrs. Ashton's example and retire to bed, she sat down in a corner of the large public sitting-room, and tried to interest herself in the papers and magazines. Her thoughts, however, would dwell persistently on her own affairs. She distrusted Mr. Ashton, both from his manner and the Abbé's warning, and as she reflected on his conduct the terrible thought struck her that perhaps he meditated betraying her to her father without effecting Gerald's release. She started to her feet, feeling like a wild creature in a trap. The idea was so horrible that she made up her mind she must take some immediate steps. Inaction was impossible with this suspicion in her head. Near her was seated a benevolent-looking old man

in a clergyman's dress, and timidly the girl went up to his side.

"I beg your pardon," she said, "but I should be so grateful if you would give me some advice upon a matter in which I am very ignorant. I cannot trust the people with whom I have come to London."

He looked up in surprise, and his glance softened as it fell on Winifred's pretty pleading face and timid anxious expression.

"I will help you if I can," he answered, making room for her on the couch beside him. "Tell me what is troubling you."

As coherently as she was able, Winifred explained her position, and her secret distrust of the lawyer. The old man heard her very patiently, asked several pithy questions, and then was silent for a moment.

"Do you know your guardian's solicitors?" he said at last, for Winifred had purposely omitted mentioning Gerald's name.

"Yes; Villiers and Leigh, but I don't know the address."

"That is soon found," and he crossed the room in search of the Directory, returning to Winifred with the address written on a slip of paper. "Tell the hall-porter," he said, "to call you a cab, and drive straight to that number in Lincoln's Inn. The solicitors must be communicated with sooner or later, and you can do no harm by placing yourself at once in their hands."

Winifred thanked him warmly, and with the precious bit of paper clasped tightly in her hand hurried to her room to fetch her hat and jacket. She thought it impolite to go off without leaving any message for the lawyer; so she begged the official, when she gave up her key, to tell Mr. Ashton that she had gone to Lincoln's Inn, and would return to lunch. Then she entered a four-wheeler, and shrank back

upon the seat in a panic of fear lest she should be seen by her father or Mr. Ashton before she had effected her purpose. She, however, arrived safely at her destination, and created wild excitement in the office of Messrs. Villiers and Leigh by the announcement of her name. Both partners and some clerks were in the room, but she remembered Mr. Villiers, who had more than once come down on business to Beech-haven, and went straight towards him.

"If you please," she said in her simplest manner, "I have come to give myself up."

Mr. Villiers was so much astonished that he gazed at the young lady without uttering a word. In place of the little pale-faced child he had seen at Beechhaven, it was certainly startling to be confronted by this charming apparition, dressed very simply, but in perfect style and fashion, for Winifred had supplemented by her own taste the efforts of the St. Etienne *modiste* who had visited her at La Ferrière.

"You are Winifred—I mean, Miss Flowers?" he said at last.

"Yes; have you forgotten me? I remember you perfectly, Mr. Villiers."

"I know you now," he said; "but you have altered, if you will allow me to say so,—improved so much since the days when you wore short frocks and pinafores, that I trust you will excuse my surprise. Come into my private room;" and as he gazed at the girl's delicate face and beautiful eyes, he wondered no longer at what he had deemed the obstinate infatuation of his client Gerald Daubeny.

"I only heard yesterday for the first time," said Winifred, looking anxiously at the lawyer as soon as they were alone, "that Mr. Daubeny is in prison for refusing to give me up. Will you please do at once what is necessary for obtaining his release?"

"Let me understand you, my dear young lady," and the

lawyer looked curiously at the girl. "I learned from Mr. Daubeny that you were shockingly illtreated as a child by your father, and had the greatest horror of returning to him. Is not this the case?"

"Yes, it is,"—and Winifred could not repress a shudder as she spoke,—"but I would have gone back to him in a moment if I had dreamed that Mr. Daubeny could be sent to prison for shielding me. I have seen no papers, and knew nothing at all about the trial until yesterday."

"May I ask if you are now acting with Mr. Daubeny's knowledge and consent?"

"No," and the beautiful eyes flashed a glance of something like defiance. "I am acting with no one's consent. I have run away from the French convent where Mr. Daubeny placed me, and I have come to England with a lawyer—Mr. Ashton. I was afraid he meant to play me false, so I came straight here this morning, but if you will not help me, I shall go back to him."

Winifred's lips tightened, and she looked at Mr. Villiers with the air of one who throws down a challenge. She had come prepared for opposition on the part of Gerald's lawyer.

"Are you aware," said the solicitor gravely, "that Mr. Daubeny has already been five months in prison, and that he told me he would rather remain there for the rest of his life than give you up to Mr. Flowers? He is sure to be released sooner or later; and if you now insist upon returning to your father, you will render useless the long imprisonment he has already borne, and certainly cause him the greatest anger and distress."

"I can't help that," said Winifred, though her voice faltered a little. "How can I remain in safety now that I know he is in prison, and that I might set him free? He will be released, will he not, if I give myself up?"

"I have no doubt he would be released if you were given

up through us, so that the submission and apology might seem to come from him."

"Then please, please arrange it!" and Winifred clasped her hands imploringly, while the tears started to her eyes. "I am very sorry, Mr. Villiers, if I was rude to you just now, but it does seem so terrible that Mr. Daubeny should be in prison for me. I would do anything—anything—to set him free. You will help me, will you not?"

The lawyer was not unmoved by the appeal, but he felt bound to consider the wishes of his client.

"I must first ascertain Mr. Daubeny's opinion —"

"But you know what that will be!" exclaimed Winifred, rising from her chair in her excitement. "Mr. Villiers, I have made up my mind. If my father is in London, which no doubt Mr. Ashton will find out, I am going back to him this very day. Nothing you or Mr. Daubeny could say would make any difference, only it would be a pity for it all to be of no use, and Mr. Daubeny to be left still in prison."

"Ashton?" said the lawyer thoughtfully, apparently indifferent to this ultimatum. "Is he a friend of yours, Miss Winifred?"

"No; he is the English lawyer at St. Etienne, and the Abbé Connois, who knows him, warned me not to trust him," she answered; "that was why I came to you."

"Did Mr. Ashton come over on purpose to bring you?"

"I suppose he did; but Mrs. Ashton came too. He said she wanted to go to London."

"What have you done with them this morning?"

"We took rooms at the Grand. Mrs. Ashton is lying down, and Mr. Ashton said he was going to Lincoln's Inn to see about my affairs, but he would not take me with him."

"Then there is only one chance left. Miss Winifred, I have known your guardian, Gerald Daubeny, since he was a pretty little chap with golden curls and knickerbockers. I

know he has this matter very deeply at heart, and I respect him for his pluck. Will you not even now comply with his wishes, and spare him the bitter pain and humiliation of seeing you handed over to your father after all he has endured to avert the catastrophe? I can send you straight off from here to a fresh hiding-place, which I flatter myself it would puzzle even Mr. Ashton to discover. Will you take the advice of Gerald Daubeny's old friend, and consent, for his sake, to place yourself unreservedly in my hands?"

"You are very kind," said the girl softly; "but, indeed, I cannot allow Gerald to remain in prison for me. It is quite, quite impossible. Please, Mr. Villiers, help me to set him free."

For a moment they looked at each other in silence, Winifred's colour rising, while her whole soul lay in her anxious, wistful eyes.

"I cannot hide you against your will, which is what I should like to do, Miss Winifred," he said slowly; "and you have been so zealous in running your own neck into the noose, that I fear it might even now be too late to save you. I can tell you where Mr. Ashton has gone. To your father's solicitors to claim the reward offered for your recovery. It's a mercy he did not carry you with him; I suppose he was not quite sure of his ground. I can take the wind out of his sails, at any rate. Fortunately the Court is sitting to-day, and I will go down with you at once."

"Oh, thank you!" cried the girl eagerly, scarcely able to believe in her success.

"You need not thank me, young lady. I should not help you in your irrational behaviour if I saw any way out of it. I consider you abominably ungrateful to Mr. Daubeny; and if you were my daughter, I should lock you up on bread and water until I got a little common-sense into your head."

With an air of honest indignation, feebly covered by a smile, the worthy lawyer put on his hat and coat, and followed Winifred from the room. The girl's cheeks were burning, and her heart was beating fast, yet she attempted no reply to the harsh remark. It was the opinion formed on her conduct by Gerald's friend; she could hardly hope that Gerald himself would be more forbearing. Never in her life had she felt so utterly deserted and alone, crushed down by the bitter consciousness of being compelled to rouse against herself the anger of those she held most dear. It did seem hard that she should go to her doom without one word of kindly sympathy to cheer her sinking heart, but her resolution was firm. At whatever cost, Gerald must be released from his unjust confinement.

In perfect silence she walked beside Mr. Villiers through the dreary yellow fog towards the Law Courts. She would at any other time have been deeply interested in the novelty of her surroundings, but now the magnificent building only impressed her with a dim sense of cold and discomfort as she followed her guide through a labyrinth of corridors to a room, without a fire, into which she was shown, and curtly asked to wait. She sat down, and leaning her elbow on the table, rested her head upon her hand. Her eager excitement had cooled, the fatal step was taken, and she had only to abide the consequences of her decision. It was a relief to feel the strain was over, that she had no more battles to fight, no more arguments to withstand; she did not mind how long they left her sitting there alone. Her sole part now was to nerve herself to endure; but she shivered as she waited, not from cold—she was quite unaware of the empty grate—but from the growing fear and apprehension that seemed to turn her sick and faint with dread. She waited a very long time, how long she did not know; but when, at last, Mr. Villiers returned to fetch her, she was so white and

trembling that, rather alarmed, he proposed a visit to the refreshment-room.

Winifred refused.

"Please let me get it over," she said quickly; "I shall not faint, I never do."

She felt her arm drawn through Mr. Villiers', and knew she was being led down more passages, which seemed to her dizzy brain to stretch before her in illimitable distance, until at last she found herself in a lighted place with strange faces about her and strange voices buzzing in her ears. There was more waiting, more delay, and the voices seemed to grow very faint and far away, rising and falling on her ears like a sound borne upon the wind. The lights danced before her eyes, and grew curiously dim; it was like a nightmare to the girl, and not one word did she comprehend of what was passing round her, although she remained outwardly composed by Mr. Villiers' side.

At last, coming towards her out of the misty sea of light and movement, she saw the face which had been the terror of her childhood—the fierce, sullen eyes, the yellow teeth, the thin, cruel lips—she heard the harsh, rasping voice, and then a merciful pall of blackness seemed to close round her, shutting out sight and sound, and Winifred knew no more.

An oath was the first sound that greeted her ears when she struggled painfully back to consciousness, and the furious query, What she meant by making such a dashed fool of herself? Looking up, she saw that she was lying on the sofa in a small room, through the windows of which the foggy daylight was feebly contending with the gas, and that at her side, regarding her with a glance of anger and impatience, stood her father. For a moment she hoped it was a dream, and shut her eyes with the fervent trust that she might open them again in her little white bed at La Ferrière; but she felt her arm roughly shaken, and was bidden to get up this

minute, and have done with her fooling. Frightened and bewildered, she raised herself to a sitting posture, when the door opened, and the lawyer, Mr. Ashton, with another gentleman, came into the room.

"She is better now," said Flowers, his gruff manner changing in a moment to one of perfect courtesy. "Do you feel well enough to stand, Winifred?" and he offered his arm to his daughter with an air of quite affectionate solicitude.

"One moment, if you please," said the unknown gentleman, who was no other than a doctor. "The young lady had better remain quiet a little longer. I have sent a prescription for her to a chemist, which will be here directly."

"Certainly," said Flowers politely; "I can wait, if necessary."

But Winifred, who knew, from dearly-bought experience, that her father was never so much to be dreaded as when outwardly self-controlled and civil, made an effort, and struggled to her feet.

"I am quite well now," she said with a wan little smile, trying to still the terrors of apprehension which ran through her. "I am very sorry to have been so stupid. I need not keep you any longer, father, if you are ready to go."

She put on her hat, which she found on a table at her side, and taking her father's offered arm, moved somewhat dizzily towards the door. In the passage, however, they were met by the doctor's messenger, and Winifred was made to swallow the mixture, which soon had the effect of clearing the mist from her eyes and brain. She was herself again now, fully awake to all that passed on her way through the corridors, and blushed crimson at noticing how the people they met stared at her, particularly the gentlemen in wigs. She saw Mr. Villiers, who advanced towards them with a stiffly, polite inquiry after her health; and, in spite of her

father's impatience, Winifred ventured to detain him for a moment with the anxious query :

" Is it all right, Mr. Villiers, about Mr. Daubeny ? "

" Quite right," he answered drily, " in so far that he will shortly be released. I have the honour to wish you and Mr. Flowers good-morning."

The good lawyer was very angry with Winifred ; but as he coldly raised his hat and turned away, he was struck by the mute anguish of the girl's eyes, and almost regretted that he had not shown her more kindness and consideration.

" She is a plucky little thing," he thought, " and I dare say she means well, but she need not be so outrageously pig-headed. Poor Daubeny, I wonder how he will take the news ? "

Winifred, however, felt anything but plucky or pig-headed as she was conducted from the Law Courts, like a prisoner, between her father and Mr. Ashton, and placed in a cab with Flowers at her side and Mr. Ashton on the opposite seat. Her courage seemed to be oozing away with every moment, but she derived temporary comfort from the lawyer's presence, as before him her father still preserved his mask of courtesy.

" Why did you run away from me, Miss Flowers ? " Mr. Ashton asked, rubbing his hands, however, as if perfectly satisfied with the course events had taken. " Were you afraid I should never come back ? "

" I did not like waiting," answered Winifred quietly ; " I suppose you had my message ? "

" I had, and it took me to Court in time to meet Mr. Flowers, who had just been summoned. You certainly do not let the grass grow under your feet. I must beg to congratulate Mr. Flowers on his daughter's talents and ability."

" Chiefly manifested at present in rebellion against lawful authority," said Flowers with a smile ; and the smile interested the lawyer, it was such a singular mixture of triumph, ferocity, and cynicism.

Mr. Ashton had secured his spoils, so it was no longer any concern of his, but he felt a glimmer of pity that such a pretty girl should be saddled with a brutal father as his penetration told him Flowers was likely to prove. She would have a hot time of it, he feared, and he wondered why the ex-actor should have been so lavish of his money, and taken such trouble to secure his daughter. He must expect to make a pretty penny out of her, but in what way? Before he had arrived at any satisfactory answer to the question, the cab had traversed the Strand, and drawn up before the Grand Hotel. Winifred was bidden to keep her seat, but the two men got out, Mr. Ashton entering the hotel, while Flowers stood at the cab-door, and gave some directions to the driver. After a short delay, Winifred's luggage was brought down and hoisted on to the roof, and Mr. Ashton advanced to say good-bye.

"I am very pleased if I have been of any service to you, Miss Flowers," he said; "and if at any future time you and your father find yourselves in our neighbourhood, I hope you will not fail to look us up."

"Thank you," answered Winifred quietly; "I am very much obliged to you for your help. Please say good-bye to Mrs. Ashton for me. I hope you will both have a very pleasant visit in London."

The lawyer drew back as Flowers re-entered the cab, and then, lifting his hat to Winifred, he stood looking after it as it lumbered away.

"That is a nice little girl," he thought. "She does not forget her manners, although she is as frightened of that brute as she can be. Wonder what he is going to do with her. I am afraid she has not got much to thank me for, poor child!" and with quite an uneasy feeling, notwithstanding the cheque in his pocket-book, he turned to re-enter the hotel.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The Prisoner of Willow Lodge.

N one of the dreary suburbs, stretching away to the north of London, stood an old-fashioned house enclosed in a high walled garden. It had been built in days when the roar of the great City was many miles distant, but the vanguard of the advancing metropolis had swept down upon the fields which lay around it, and it now remained alone, an oasis in the midst of interminable rows of small yellow-brick houses with "roofs of slated ugliness." The old house, Willow Lodge, had been let some few months previously to a gentleman, Mr. Harrison, who seldom seemed to inhabit it himself, but left it almost exclusively to his housekeeper and servant. Few people in London trouble themselves about their next-door neighbour's affairs; and as the tradespeople and rates and taxes were duly paid, no one inquired why a single gentleman should burden himself with a house in which he did not reside, and which would have comfortably accommodated a family of ten.

The housekeeper appeared to have no friends to visit her, and the servant never gossiped at the door. They were a curious pair: the housekeeper, who spoke with the accent and manners of a lady, being a middle-aged woman, frigid and upright as a poker, with a hard immovable face, cold hazel eyes, and an inflexible severity of deportment, more befitting a female warder than the occupant of a gentleman's house. She rarely spoke, except to give orders, or to find fault with the servant, and only quitted the house to settle the tradespeople's bills, and on Sundays to find her way to a

small chapel in the neighbourhood, where, to the secret dismay of the preacher, she would sit bolt upright, regarding him with a stony stare which never deviated from his face until the sermon was ended. When not occupied with her household duties, which she performed with conscientious precision, she would sit in a high-backed chair by the table reading a book of theology by Calvin or one of his school, while occasionally she would be seen fashioning under-garments in the very stiffest and hardest of unbleached calico, which, as they could hardly be intended for her own use, were presumably designed for the delectation of the poor. The servant was of a very different type—a strong, healthy-looking young woman, with a sullen defiant air, although she was meekly submissive to the housekeeper's orders, never spoke to the tradespeople, or asserted her liberty in any way; but her small dark eyes would sometimes light up with an angry sparkle as if their owner would have delighted to rebel if she had dared.

The house was but half furnished, and was pervaded by a clammy chill, arising partly from the November fog, partly from the fact that the only fire was in the kitchen; for the grate in the housekeeper's room was filled merely by a few black coals, from which stray smoke-wreaths curled faintly up the chimney. The housekeeper was at any time impervious to cold, and her thoughts were also fully occupied by a telegram which the servant had just put into her hand:

“To Mrs. Monk, Willow Lodge.

“At last. Arrive immediately.”

There was no signature, and the date was from a London post-office; but the laconic message seemed no puzzle to the housekeeper, and after a short pause, in which she appeared to be collecting her thoughts, she rose and rang the bell.

“Jane,” she said to the servant, “light the fire in your

master's sitting-room at once, and make the beds in the large room upstairs."

Then carefully placing a marker between the leaves of her book, Mrs. Monk herself ascended the stairs to a bedroom on the second floor. It was a good-sized apartment, with two windows looking into the garden, both barred with iron, as if for a children's nursery. There was no carpet on the clean-scrubbed floor, and the furniture was of the simplest description, consisting of two beds, a chest of drawers, bare toilet necessaries, a round table, and a couple of cane-bottomed chairs. Standing in the centre, Mrs. Monk surveyed the scene. Everything was hard, cold, and spotless; and that it met her approval was evident, for she found no fault when the servant entered with the sheets and pillow-cases—a significant sign, for words of commendation never passed those firmly-compressed lips.

"Go and open the front gates," she said when the work was finished, and Jane stared; she had never received such an order since her first arrival at Willow Lodge.

When she had returned from her errand, she was further bidden to prepare and light the fire in her master's bedroom; and she had scarcely fulfilled her task before a cab turned into the drive, and she was summoned to answer the front door. Mrs. Monk, stiff and angular, stood waiting in the hall, not a hair out of place, not a stain upon the whiteness of her linen cuffs and collar. She wore a dark stuff dress, and her head was crowned with an erection in black silk which bore a striking resemblance to a policeman's helmet. From the cab two persons alighted, and advanced towards the austere-looking matron—a man leading a girl, by his hand laid on her arm.

"Got her, you see, Monk!" he said, in a tone of triumph. "The jade has given us the slip long enough; we will soon tame her now, I reckon. Is the room ready?"

"Quite ready, sir."

"Then take her up. Hanged if I am not sick of the sight of her white face already."

He turned to swear at the cabman who was bringing in the luggage, and Mrs. Monk laid her cold, claw-like fingers on the girl's wrist.

"Come with me," she said, in her most freezing tone, and without a word the new-comer moved at the housekeeper's side to the room at the top of the house.

"Wipe your feet," said Mrs. Monk, stopping on a rug outside the door. "Now you may come in," and she led her companion over the threshold. "This is your bed, and you will please to keep your things tidily on this side of the room."

"Who sleeps in the other bed?" asked the girl quickly, in a tone of evident surprise.

"I shall," returned the housekeeper drily.

"And who are you?"

"You will find out in time. I warn you to give me no impertinence, or it will be the worse for you. I know who you are, Winifred Flowers; and I don't admire what I have heard of you. I shall hope to bring you to a clearer view of the Fifth Commandment before you have lived long under my charge."

"Do you mind telling me what my father is going to do with me?" asked the girl with a quiet dignity which seemed her only refuge against the housekeeper's insolence.

"Teach you obedience, in the first place; of which lesson, it seems, you stand very much in need——"

A knock at the door interrupted Mrs. Monk in her speech, and she opened it to admit the luggage, carried up by Jane and the cabman, giving minute directions where each article was to be placed, and then following them out and locking the door behind her.

Winifred stood looking about her in growing amazement. This reception was widely different to the one she had pictured. In spite of her father's improved appearance, she had expected to take up her old life very much where she had dropped it: to find herself in a dirty lodging-house, resuming her work for the stage amongst coarse men and vulgar women, where she would probably be knocked about and bullied, but so long as she satisfied her father's requirements, would be left to take her own way, neglected and unnoticed. It now seemed she was to be a prisoner, with this severe, inflexible person as her gaoler. Who was the woman, with her neat precise manners and measured speech —the last inmate Winifred would have expected to find in her father's house? Could she be his wife? She spoke with an air of such assured authority: but then she had called him "sir"; she must be only a housekeeper after all. The girl was still puzzling over the mystery, when Mrs. Monk marched back into the room.

"What, still idle? You will have to turn over a new leaf in this house, Winifred Flowers. For one thing, you have to keep this room clean as it was when you arrived. Look at the marks the man's boots have made on the floor. You will find a pail and scrubbing-brush in that cupboard. Get them out, and wash the boards at once."

Winifred, however, did not stir. She stood confronting the housekeeper's tall, gaunt figure, a steady light in her eyes and a flush rising to her cheeks.

"I am neither a child nor a servant," she said disdainfully. "I do not know what right you have to order me about."

"Do you wish me to send for your father to enforce my authority?" asked Mrs. Monk coldly. "I should advise you, for your own sake, to obey without any question. You will soon learn who is master."

"I am no child now," returned Winifred haughtily. "If my father illtreats me, I will appeal to the Law for protection."

Mrs. Monk opened the door.

"Jane," she called, and the servant would seem to have been waiting on the landing from the celerity with which she presented herself. "Jane, go downstairs, and request your master to be so good as to come to me at once."

It was several minutes before Mr. Flowers thought fit to comply with the summons; then he entered the room with an airy, swaggering gait.

"Dash it all, Monk, can't you tackle the girl on your own account, without plaguing me? What has she been up to now, the vixen?"

"As she defies my authority, sir, and talks of appealing to the protection of the Law, I thought it as well that you should inform her with your own lips of her real position."

"I'll do more than that," returned Flowers grimly, arming himself with a strap from a roll of wraps. "I'll give a practical illustration, as the lecturers say;" and approaching Winifred, he caught her arm and struck her sharply across the shoulders with the strap. "The sooner you learn the facts of the case, my girl, the better. You are a prisoner in this house, where neither your friends nor the police can reach you; and you will only leave it at my will and pleasure. Also, you are to do every mortal thing Mrs. Monk may tell you; and if you disobey her you will get yourself into greater trouble;" and emphasising his words by half-a-dozen stinging blows upon the girl's shoulders and arms, Flowers turned on his heel and walked out of the room.

"Now," said the housekeeper, freezingly regarding Winifred, who was standing with her teeth set hard and the old look of passive endurance in her eyes, "perhaps you will do what you are told. You have Mr. Flowers' footmarks to wash out as well as the cabman's. Turn up your sleeves

and put on this apron. You can take some water from the jug."

Winifred silently obeyed. She saw the hopelessness of further resistance, and her whole strength was centred in driving back the tears which started to her eyes. She would not give her gaoler the satisfaction of knowing how utterly wretched and lonely she felt. It was evident she was to be treated like a naughty child in disgrace, and she could only submit passively to whatever indignities they might choose to make her undergo. The room was very cold, and she shivered as she dipped her hands into the chilly water, beginning also to feel quite faint from want of food. Nervous excitement had prevented her from swallowing more than a piece of toast for breakfast, and she had had no lunch at all. It was now late in the afternoon. The housekeeper lighted a candle, and, standing over her prisoner, directed her sternly in the performance of the novel task.

"The sooner you drop your fine-lady airs the better," she remarked, noticing how languidly the girl moved. "We shall stand no nonsense in this house, you will find. That is not the way to scrub."

She took the brush roughly out of Winifred's hand, showed her vigorously how it should be used, and in returning it, whether by accident or design, struck it sharply across her pupil's fingers.

More than once Winifred was on the point of flinging it away, and defying her persecutors to do their worst; but the old childish dread of her father was strong within her, and defenceless as she was, she dared not face the consequences of arousing his savage temper. When, at last, her task was accomplished to Mrs. Monk's satisfaction, she was bidden to unlock and unpack her boxes, the housekeeper superintending the operation with lynx eyes which nothing seemed to escape. The luggage had been packed by the sisters at La Ferrière,

and hidden away in odd corners Winifred came upon little remembrances from each of her friends. There was a silk bag filled with pink and white peppermint-drops from Sœur Melanie, a pincushion from Sœur Marie de la Croix, and a rosary from Sœur Valerie, while the dignified Superior had put in a little pot of Normandy honey, some pears, and a few cakes which Winifred especially liked. Each article was neatly wrapped in paper and cotton-wool, and inscribed with the name and good wishes of the donor, and as she unfolded them tears rose to Winifred's eyes at the kindly thought of her distant friends. She was scarcely, however, allowed a moment to linger over the souvenirs. Mrs. Monk's horror at the rosary, and a crucifix which had been given to Winifred by the Abbé, was almost too great for words. She confiscated them immediately, also the eatables, and further proceeded to make a clean sweep of Winifred's books, drawing materials, and ornaments, summoning Jane to carry them in armfuls from the room, until nothing was left but the girl's clothes neatly bestowed in the chest of drawers, her Bible and Prayer Book, and the little black Testament which had belonged to her mother and which she had taken with her from the caravan.

"You will have something else to do now than to amuse yourself," the housekeeper sternly remarked, and Winifred silently submitted to see her treasures borne off before her eyes, until Mrs. Monk laid violent hands upon a leather case containing the photographs of Gerald and Mrs. Daubeny.

"Please let me keep that," she cried imploringly. "I will put it away in a drawer, if you like; but pray let me have it to look at sometimes."

"Understand once for all," said Mrs. Monk icily, "that you have broken altogether with your former life, and you are not expected to allude to it in any way. Henceforth your friends will be of your father's choosing, and the sooner you forget the old ones the better for you. Here, Jane," and she

tossed the case on to the top of Winifred's desk and writing materials, which the servant was bearing from the room.

It was the last straw to poor Winifred, for those photographs had been her most cherished possession since her boxes had been forwarded to La Ferrière, and her tears fell fast into the trunk over which she was bending, not unnoticed by the housekeeper, although she thought fit to let them pass without remark. When at length the unpacking was finished and the empty boxes carried from the room, Mrs. Monk turned and critically surveyed her prisoner. The girl's face was very pale, her slight figure was drooping, and there was a look of utter weariness in her soft eyes.

"Are you hungry?" inquired the housekeeper coldly.

"I don't think I am hungry," said Winifred. "I only feel a little faint. I have had nothing to eat all day."

To the girl's surprise, Mrs. Monk proceeded to feel her pulse, and left the room, locking the door behind her. In course of time she returned, bringing in a teacup a small portion of Brand's Essence, in a lukewarm condition, which she ordered Winifred to swallow.

"I would rather not," and Winifred recoiled from the unpalatable-looking liquid. "May I go to bed, and not take anything? I was travelling all last night."

"If you choose to turn night into day, it is no affair of mine. I shall not allow you to go to bed till the proper time; so drink that off directly."

Winifred obeyed, and then was told to take her seat at the table.

"I shall expect you to sew other evenings," said Mrs. Monk, producing her lengths of unbleached calico. "As this is the first night, you may read out to me while I work," and she handed Winifred the theological book she had been studying in the afternoon, pointing to the paragraph at which she wished the girl to begin.

"Are we to stay in this room without a fire?" asked Winifred, glancing with a shiver at the empty grate.

"You have not come here to be pampered with luxuries. Begin your reading, and remember, the worse you read the longer I shall keep you at it."

With a sinking heart, Winifred commenced. Warned by the threat, she tried to read intelligently; but if the involved sentences possessed a meaning, her tired brain was quite incapable of understanding it, and she stumbled hopelessly over the unaccustomed theological phraseology. The letters danced before her sleepy eyes as she read on, frequently interrupted by sharp reprimands for her carelessness and inattention.

"May I not go to bed?" she asked piteously, at last. "I am so tired, I really can't understand what I am reading."

"Perhaps the sight of your father would quicken your perceptions," returned Mrs. Monk significantly. "I shall certainly try the experiment if you continue to blunder in this disgraceful fashion."

And alarmed by the threat, Winifred struggled desperately with her drowsiness, succeeding in throwing a trifle more expression into her voice, until, about ten o'clock, she received tardy permission to close the book and go to bed.

Utterly wearied and worn out, she had no sooner lain down on the hard straw mattress than she fell sound asleep. Her last glimpse of Mrs. Monk had been seated at the table, spectacles on nose, with the theological book open in front of her; and it seemed to Winifred that she had scarcely closed her eyes before a stern voice called her name, and she was bidden to get up and dress.

"What time is it?" she asked, rubbing her eyes like a child to try and get the sleep out of them.

"Six o'clock precisely. Being the first day, I have

given you an hour's grace; other mornings you will rise at five."

Winifred stared. There sat Mrs. Monk with the book before her, stiff, neat, inflexible in her cap and gown, as she had sat the previous evening. Could the housekeeper have been sitting there all night? Shivering with cold as her bare feet touched the carpetless floor, her slippers having been condemned as superfluous luxuries, she washed in the ice-cold water, and dressed as rapidly as her numbed fingers would permit, taking refuge in a shawl, to which happily the housekeeper made no objection. When she was ready, Mrs. Monk presented her with a Bible open at a certain chapter in the Kings consisting chiefly of genealogies.

"Before you begin your other work," she said, "you will learn that chapter for me."

With a sigh Winifred set to her task, but she could not learn quickly, and it was past eight o'clock before she had repeated it to Mrs. Monk's content. Then she had to make the beds and sweep and dust the room, until at last Mrs. Monk went downstairs, and Jane soon after made her appearance with a small cup of weak tea and a plate of dry, stale bread. The servant's looks were not prepossessing, but Winifred was in too great despair to be particular.

"Are you the only servant in the house?" she asked, with an eager glance of appeal; but Jane put down the tray and walked out of the room without reply, turning the key, as before, in the lock.

Wild with the desire of escape, Winifred flew to the windows, but they were strongly barred; she could see the high wall surrounding the wintry garden, and realised only too keenly the strength and security of her prison.

"If I could only write to Gerald, I should be content to bear anything," she thought. "How foolish I was not to do it yesterday morning, but I never dreamed of being shut

up like this. What will he think of me for coming to England and giving myself up without explaining a word to him? There is no chance he can forgive me now. I only hope I may die soon. Father must mean to kill me; he does not seem to want me for anything else."

She was soon undeceived. Mrs. Monk appeared with a paper-covered book in her hand, an acting edition of a modern play, and bade Winifred study the heroine's part, which her father would hear her rehearse that afternoon. The girl's heart sank lower than before. Her old distaste for the stage was stronger than ever, and she saw at a glance that it was a long and difficult part. She would have preferred even the Jewish chronologies. Before she began, however, she was ordered to put on her hat and jacket, and led by Mrs. Monk was marched for half an hour solemnly up and down a gravel-walk in the garden, and then conducted back to her room, where she was left alone with the book. More than three hours went by, during which the girl struggled painfully with the difficulties of her task, when Jane brought up her dinner, which consisted of a slice of cold meat, more stale bread, and cold water; and shortly afterwards Mrs. Monk appeared to escort her for another silent half-hour's walk in the garden. On her return she was taken to a comfortable sitting-room on the first floor, where Mr. Flowers was lounging in an arm-chair beside a cheerful fire, smoking a meerschaum pipe.

He looked cynically at his daughter as she stood before him, and smiled, a smile which made the girl shiver, it was so cruel and malicious.

"So, Winifred, I hear you have grown a little tamer since your arrival. I flatter myself I know how to deal with refractory children. I told that impudent young beggar I would pay you out for his behaviour to me, and I rather think I am keeping my word. Confound him!" went on Mr.

Flowers savagely, as Winifred made no reply, "I don't think he will meddle in my affairs again. Six months in quod, and now the costs will downright ruin him."

"Sir Rawdon will help him," said Winifred quickly, her eyes dilating with horror, for the pecuniary loss which Gerald must incur in the affair had never struck her before.

Flowers smiled.

"I rather think Sir Rawdon won't," he remarked coolly, "not exactly;" and he laughed, a short, significant laugh.

"He must, for his own nephew; but it is dreadful that he should have to pay anything at all. Ah! if I had only known at first."

Tears of distress were in the girl's eyes, and Flowers regarded her in contemptuous amusement.

"Now, look here, Winifred, I am not going to have you crying over that confounded scamp before my face. You have carried on that game long enough. He has been punished for his share, and, now I have got you, I shall precious soon make you repent yours. He will be sold up before many weeks are over, and serve him right."

He was interrupted by a cry from Winifred, who had pressed her hand over her eyes as if to shut out some horrible sight:

"Ah! no, no. Such a shameful thing could never be. Father, you will let me write to him? I must, I must. Just a little note to tell him I did not understand, or I would have given myself up at once," and she held out her hands with an imploring look and gesture, which Flowers greeted with a loud laugh.

"Bravo, Winifred,—you have improved uncommonly. That tone and pose would bring down the gallery. Hullo! what the dickens is she up to now?"

He started from his chair as Winifred rushed out of the room and flew down the stairs towards the hall-door. It was locked, however, and the key gone; and while she was

struggling to open it, Flowers came behind, and lifting her off her feet, carried her back to the sitting-room, where he locked the door and put the key in his pocket.

"So," he exclaimed, with a blow which made her reel, "that is your little game, is it? Won't do, my girl. You are as safe here as in Millbank itself, and have as much chance of escape. Doesn't it strike you that you had better take things quietly? That Daubeny fellow can't follow you in here, curse him; and there is nothing to prevent my flogging you within an inch of your life, if I take the trouble to do it."

He spoke with unusual self-restraint, but his look made Winifred shudder as she stood before him, flushed and panting with her fruitless exertions.

"I wish you would kill me," she said with sudden spirit. "You have been nothing but a tyrant to me all my life, and to my mother before me. Why did you let me go to Beech-haven to learn what home and happiness mean, only to drag me back into misery and slavery, and ruin those who were good and noble enough to try and save me from you?"

"Why?" repeated Flowers with a laugh, as if the question tickled him. "Because I got £50 for you then, and because I expect to get a good sight more than £50 now. You have grown into a decent looking girl, Winifred, as that fellow Daubeny evidently knew; and beauty is marketable. If I had left you any longer, he would have married you himself, instead of going to prison for you, and where should I have been?"

"How can you say such a thing?" exclaimed Winifred, indignantly. "He never thought——" And then there suddenly flashed across her mind the memory of the strange dream which had fleeted before her opening eyes on the sea-coast of Normandy. Suppose it had been no dream; suppose that Gerald had really cared for her in the way her father meant? And as the wonderful thought filled her mind, she hung her head, and stood the picture of blushing confusion.

"You can't deny it," said Flowers with an angry scowl. "You need not think to come over me with airs of injured innocence. I'll be even with you yet, you little sly, cheeky baggage!"

And as an earnest of his intentions, he inflicted a savage pinch on the girl's soft arm with the whole strength of his merciless fingers.

She did not cry out, she scarcely winced: her whole soul was so filled and uplifted by this wonderful new thought of Gerald's love, that she stood with perfect indifference before her angry father. He might do to her what he pleased, for he was powerless to take from her the overpowering rapture awakened by his words.

CHAPTER XIX.

Beating the Bars.



PBORNE by the marvellous hope which this speech of her father had infused into her mind, Winifred at first endured the miseries and privations of her new life as if they scarcely touched her at all. The more she pondered over the past, and considered Gerald's looks and words in the light of this amazing revelation, the more she felt that Flowers had spoken the truth. Gerald must have loved her, and the knowledge seemed to open before her an enchanted land of mystic joy and wonder, through which she roamed heedless of the harsh reality of her surroundings. But doubts soon came to disturb this blissful dream. She had no right to infer Gerald's feelings from his conduct towards her. With his natural chivalry and kindness, he might have acted solely out of brotherly affection for the helpless girl he had always called his sister. Was she not very bold and forward to have even supposed anything else possible? Winifred blushed crimson, and tried to fix her mind upon the part she was studying. But once awakened, the idea was not easily banished from her thoughts, and she had plenty of time for reflection during the long evenings when she was set to sew interminable seams in the rough unbleached calico. The hope faded from her mind as time went on. An assurance of Gerald's love would have borne her unmoved through any period of slow torture, but the very doubts, fears, and self-tormentings which true love brings ever in its train tended to depress her spirits, and aid the gradual undermining which insufficient food and sleep was

working in her strength and courage. Not that her health yet seriously suffered, Mrs. Monk seemed to take care of that; but for the most trifling offence she would keep Winifred working late into the night, and always make her rise at five a.m., while the food she allowed her was of prison quality and quantity, never sufficient to satisfy the appetite of a healthy girl. Escape was impossible. Winifred was watched too closely by day, and at night Mrs. Monk slept with the key of the locked door under her pillow, manifesting an unfailing capacity for waking at the slightest sound in the room.

It was, however, the afternoons spent with her father that the girl dreaded most. She was made to learn part after part, and rehearse them under the sharp fire of Mr. Flowers' taunts and abuse. In full rehearsal Winifred might have caught some idea of the character she was supposed to represent, but in cold blood to throw herself into a part, interrupted every moment by her father's brutal sneers, was absolutely impossible to her nervous sensitive nature. She knew that she was failing miserably, and at last goaded by the disheartening consciousness of her own incapacity, she turned at bay, and told her father that she was sure she could never become an actress, and he would make much more money out of her by letting her paint pictures for sale. Flowers' only answer was a blow which felled Winifred to the ground; and he would probably have proceeded to further extremities, had not the housekeeper, who always sat in an adjoining room during the girl's interviews with her father, suddenly appeared upon the scene.

"I beg your pardon, sir," she remarked, severely regarding Winifred, who had risen somewhat dizzily to her feet, "but you forget your daughter has bones which may possibly be broken. It would be better, perhaps, for you to leave her punishment to me."

And to Winifred's intense surprise, Mrs. Monk carried her

off then and there, while Flowers growled and swore, but offered no opposition to her departure. She was further astonished by the housekeeper applying a cold-water bandage to the large bruise on the side of her head where her father's hand had struck her, and ordering her straight to bed, where she was left to sleep in peace for the rest of the evening. Despite the rigid discipline under which she was held, Winifred began to regard the inflexible woman in the light of a protector, especially after a certain day when at her usual time for descending to her father's room, she was bidden to sit down to her needlework instead, and a few minutes later was terrified by an assault upon the locked door, and a furious summons from Flowers, who was evidently drunk. Winifred's hand trembled too much to hold her needle, but the housekeeper went on reading as if she heard nothing, until after a time the baffled man retired in disgust, and received his daughter on the following day as if no interruption had occurred.

She had been about a month at Willow Lodge, when one afternoon on descending as usual to her father's sitting-room, Winifred found, to her amazement, a stranger in conversation with Mr. Flowers. He was a stout, pompous man, apparently on the wrong side of fifty, with a bald head, a sleek face, and a smooth unctuous manner.

"This is my daughter," said Flowers shortly. "Now Winifred, if you don't do your best to-day, you will catch it afterwards, I can promise you."

"I hope I put you to no inconvenience, my dear," said the gentleman, with a profound bow. "I am in want of a leading lady for my company, and your father has kindly offered to —"

"To put you through your paces," interrupted Flowers without ceremony. "So now, look sharp, my girl. It is that farce you wanted to hear, Dixon?"

Winifred was made to rehearse several parts, which she had studied, to the usual accompaniments of her father's irritable sneers and criticisms, the gentleman endeavouring to soften them by bland asides of which Flowers took not the smallest notice. Her first sight of a stranger had made the girl's heart bound with the wild hope of approaching liberty but the more she looked at his smug, self-satisfied face, the less she liked it. Hypocrisy seemed written in every line, and she felt that any appeal to his pity or kindness would be utterly useless, and merely serve to bring upon her her father's subsequent anger. She therefore retired, when bidden, without a word, and was as usual conducted by Mrs. Monk back to her prison.

The next day the gentleman was there again, and putting himself more forward than on the previous afternoon, he paid Winifred so many compliments, and "my dearest" her to such a degree, that she was quite thankful for her father's presence and the sharp sarcasm with which he replied to his friend's remarks.

On the third day, to her great relief, Flowers was alone in the room; but when she presented him with the play-book in which she had been studying a new part, he tossed it into the fire.

"Hanged if I plague myself any longer over a duffer like you. I have settled your business, my girl, and I have had you down to inform you of the fact."

"How?" asked Winifred in rising alarm, as Flowers leaned back in his arm-chair surveying his daughter with an evil smile on his repulsive face.

"How? I should think your own sense would tell you. You are an utter fool at acting. The old boy Dixon told me so at once. There is nothing to be made out of you in that line; but, thank the Lord, you have got a face which some folks seem to fancy, though what they can see in your white

cheeks and saucer-eyes passes my comprehension. Each man to his taste. Dixon has offered a pretty penny for you, and I have said 'done' to the bargain."

"What do you mean?" cried the girl, terrified more by Flowers' tone than by understanding the real significance of his words.

"I mean that I have sold you, if you want plain English," returned Flowers with a chuckle, "and for rather more than £50 this time. The old boy is rolling, and has offered to take the house as well as you off my hands; so he will come in to-morrow, and Monk and I will clear out."

For a moment Winifred stood motionless, unable to believe that she had heard aright, or that Flowers was not amusing himself with a cruel joke at her expense. Then she threw herself on her knees beside his chair.

"Father, you cannot mean it, you cannot, it is too horrible. I am your daughter; and if I cannot act, I will work, slave night and day, do anything you please, if only you will tell me you were jesting, and said that simply to frighten me."

Flowers put his hand under Winifred's chin, and looked straight into her terrified eyes and white imploring face.

"Your promises come a little too late, my girl," he said with slow deliberation. "You are my daughter, and I shall do with you as I please. I have made the bargain, and, by Heaven, I mean to carry it out."

"You dare not do it!" she cried wildly, springing to her feet, while the blood receded even from her lips, and her face looked livid. "The Law would punish you for it, I know it would."

"Ah! if it caught me; but I should lose no time in clearing out of the country. As to Dixon, he can take his chance. It is his affair, not mine," and he shrugged his shoulders cynically.

"Then I tell you one thing," said Winifred speaking through her clenched teeth: "you shall never sell me alive."

Her eyes were on the window, and in a moment Flowers had risen and caught her in his rough grasp.

"Not so fast, my girl. I think I can engage to prevent your committing *felo-de-se* between this time and to-morrow. What a little fool you are to make such a thundering fuss over a trifle! You will be better treated, I promise you, with Dixon for your warder, than Mrs. Monk and me."

Winifred struggled vainly with the strong hands which held her, and then, beside herself with terror, she uttered shriek after shriek, which rang through the empty house.

The door burst open, and someone entered who literally tore the girl from her father's grasp; but it was not Mrs. Monk who now stood looking down on her with pitying gaze, the first glance of kindness Winifred had received since the prison doors had closed upon her. Her astonishment was so great, that for a moment she thought her eyes must be playing her false: then, convinced of the reality of the apparition, she sprang forward with a cry of joy:

"Oh! Sir Rawdon, is it really you? You will save me, will you not?"

Before the baronet could speak, Flowers stepped before his daughter, and with a fierce oath demanded his visitor's business.

"I came to call on Miss Flowers," said Sir Rawdon coldly. "Her friends have been naturally uneasy at her disappearance, and the detectives at last succeeded in tracking her to this house, where I have fortunately arrived in time to protect her from your brutality."

"You have no power to protect her. She is my daughter, and the Law has given her up to me," growled Flowers savagely.

"The Law gives you no right to illtreat her. I shall at once give information against you to the police."

"We'll see about that," and catching up the poker, Flowers set his back against the door. "Now, my fine cock, you crow loud enough; but I'll make you alter your tune. There is no man living shall threaten Jim Flowers in his own house without paying dearly enough for the amusement."

Winifred uttered a cry of alarm as the poker was flourished within an inch of Sir Rawdon's head. He was certainly the taller of the two, but his slight figure looked utterly unable to cope with the powerful form of his antagonist. The baronet, however, seemed entirely unmoved by the outbreak.

"My carriage and servants are at the door," he said quietly. "I should advise you, Mr. Flowers, to consult your own interests in this matter. You can't put me out of the way without drawing down unpleasant consequences upon yourself."

Sir Rawdon's coolness seemed not without its effect on Flowers' rage. He lowered the poker, and inquired sullenly what his visitor wanted.

"To free your daughter from this shameful imprisonment."

"She has not been illtreated," said Flowers excitedly. "Nothing can be proved against me. She has had proper food and exercise; and if her life has not been as pleasant as she might fancy, I have been only exerting my parental authority in correcting her for her stubbornness and disobedience, which I am quite within my rights in doing."

"Then perhaps Miss Flowers will tell me," said Sir Rawdon sarcastically, "the cause of the shrieks which greeted my ears at the hall-door? I am afraid I nearly knocked over your servant in my haste to reach this room."

Winifred flushed crimson.

"Ask my father," she murmured. "I can't tell you, Sir Rawdon; it was too horrible."

"Bah! it was only a joke," said Flowers roughly. "The little idiot believes everything she is told."

"Oh! no, no; I am sure he was in earnest," cried the girl with a shudder. "Sir Rawdon, you will not go away, and leave me in this dreadful house?"

"Not if I can help it," he answered; "but, Winifred, your father is right so far. You are under his authority, and unless you have any positive illtreatment to complain of which can be proved before a magistrate, I have no power to remove you from his roof."

The girl's heart sank under his decided tone. In spite of her repugnance to allude to the subject in his presence, she felt it was necessary to acquaint Sir Rawdon with her actual position.

"I will tell you why I was so frightened just now," she said. "There has been a horrid-looking man, a theatrical manager, called Dixon, here the last two afternoons, and my father told me that he had made a bargain with him to buy me and the house, and that Mr. Dixon would come in to-morrow, and he and the housekeeper would leave."

Winifred's cheeks were in a flame long before she had come to the end of her sentence, and Sir Rawdon's dark eyes gleamed.

"You scoundrel!" he said between his teeth.

"You had better keep a civil tongue in your head," returned Flowers irritably. "I tell you it was nothing but a joke."

"A questionable joke! Perhaps, to carry it on, you will tell me at what figure you set your daughter's price?"

"£500," replied Flowers concisely.

"Then I offer you the same sum to set her free."

"Sir Rawdon, how good you are!" exclaimed Winifred, with an eager burst of gratitude.

"Won't do," said Flowers sullenly; "she would go

straight back to those cursed Daubens, and I hate that fellow like poison. I would rather throttle her than let him have her. I am dashed if she shall leave my hands except to go to another man's keeping."

"My name is Daubeny," said Sir Rawdon with a curious smile. "I have the honour to be your enemy's uncle, Mr. Flowers; but I suppose your prejudice does not extend to me?"

"I know nothing of you," said Flowers shortly.

"Then you consider my money as good as another man's?"

"Your money—yes; but if you were to offer me £5,000 down, I would not let the girl go to your nephew."

Sir Rawdon was silent for a moment; then he turned to Winifred with a curiously deprecating air:

"I see no other way out of it," he said. "Winifred, will you marry me?"

The girl recoiled in a panic of dismay.

"No, no," she cried in horror; "not for the whole world!" Then, with a dim sense of her folly in failing to propitiate the one friend who stood between her and her father's treachery, she added piteously: "I could not, indeed, Sir Rawdon; you are very good to think of it. Please do not be angry with me; but, indeed, I could not do it."

"She prefers Dixon after all," said Flowers with a brutal laugh. "Take your choice, my girl. One or the other shall have you, but it is all the same to me which, so long as I get the cash. If this gentleman is fool enough to marry you into the bargain, so much the better for you."

Winifred gave one startled look from her father to Sir Rawdon, saw that Flowers was clearly in earnest, and, half wild with terror, flew towards the window. Death seemed to her infinitely preferable to either fate with which she was confronted, and in another second she would have dashed

herself through the glass of the first-floor room, when, with a cat-like spring, Sir Rawdon caught her, and drew her back struggling in his arms.

"My poor child, is marriage with me then such a terrible alternative?" he asked gravely.

"She is crazy, the little vixen," said Flowers angrily. "Here, give her to me, Sir Rawdon."

He placed his daughter in a large arm-chair, took a piece of twine from a drawer, and secured her by passing it round her waist and tying it to the back of the chair. Then threatening her fiercely if she attempted to move, he looked round at his visitor.

"You will hardly be wanting her after this exhibition, I reckon?" he said with a short laugh.

"Look here," said Sir Rawdon sternly, "I cannot have her treated in this disgraceful fashion. I will give you £500 down if you will engage to let things go on as they were; and if in course of time Winifred should change her mind, and agree to marry me, I will give you £500 more."

"How if she does not?"

"You will have secured £500, and will still have her in your own hands."

"Well, how much grace do you want? I am not going to wait for ever."

"Six months, at least; and the time to be extended, if I choose to give you further instalments."

"Done," said Flowers coolly; and he turned to look for a pen, which did not seem to be forthcoming, and swearing under his breath at the housemaid, he left the room to seek one.

"Winifred, I cannot tell you how sorry I am to be compelled to force myself upon you like this," said Sir Rawdon earnestly. "Of course, under ordinary circumstances, I should take 'No' for an answer; but you see for yourself, it is the only way in which I can help you. I know your father

is a scamp, but there is no way of bringing his villainy home to him. I would buy you off in a minute if I could, but evidently nothing will induce him to free you outright. It is most unfortunate he should have taken up such an absurd idea about Gerald."

"You are very good," answered Winifred with heightened colour; "and, indeed, I am very grateful; but please, Sir Rawdon, tell me about Beechhaven. I have heard nothing all this time."

"They are all very well, I believe," he answered shortly.

"My father told me they would be ruined by this dreadful law-suit."

"Well, I fancy from what I have heard they are in difficulties; but Gerald keeps his head above water, and does not trouble me with his affairs."

"But you will help them, of course?"

"That depends," said Sir Rawdon in a reserved tone. "Gerald has seriously displeased me once or twice of late, and I hardly think he will come to me for assistance."

"To whom else should he go? Sir Rawdon, think of all he did for you that terrible time at the Towers. He has always been at your beck and call. You cannot really mean to desert him now?"

"It is no question of desertion if he does not apply to me; but for your sake, Winifred, I will make inquiries, and see what can be done."

"Oh, thank you!" she cried fervently. "And will you tell them you have seen me, and that, thanks to you, I am safe at present? I am watched so that I have no chance of writing."

"I will, if you wish it."

"Yes, I think they must want to hear. Sir Rawdon, do you know if they were very vexed with me for giving myself up?"

"I am afraid they were," he answered with evident reluctance. "In fact, Winifred, that was one of the subjects upon which Gerald and I disagreed. It was natural he should have been annoyed at your surrendering yourself after he had been so many months in prison to avert it; but he might have given you credit for the pluck and unselfishness with which you acted, instead of considering it a wilful freak. You know Gerald is very obstinate, and when he once takes an idea into his head nothing will get it out."

"He thought that of me?" murmured Winifred, her face falling, and tears of distress coming into her eyes. "Sir Rawdon, you surely are mistaken. He must have known I only did it because I felt it right."

"Then he did not say so," returned Sir Rawdon decidedly. "You know five months in prison does not tend to sweeten a man's temper, and Gerald can be very hard on people when he thinks they have acted with wilfulness and folly."

Winifred's heart sank like lead. She knew Sir Rawdon spoke the truth with regard to his nephew's character. Gerald could be pitilessly severe where he considered blame was due, yet she could hardly bring herself to believe he could be seriously displeased with his adopted sister.

"I thought he would understand," she said piteously. "How could I have left him in prison after I knew the truth? I should never have forgiven myself for acting differently."

"So I believe. You acted like the noble plucky girl I have always thought you; but Gerald, you see, has been used to implicit obedience from you, and has not yet realised that you have come to an age when, in such questions, a woman must decide for herself. I will try to make your conduct clear to him if you wish it; but after what has passed between us, I should certainly prefer not to allude to the subject again."

"I would rather you said nothing," returned Winifred

proudly. "If he does not understand for himself, it is better left alone;" and she sat gazing into the fire with eyes of such pitiful pain and misery, that Sir Rawdon hastily changed the subject.

"I only wish I could do more for you; but I dare not, for your sake, provoke your father by requiring too much."

"I am very much obliged to you for what you have done," said Winifred, rousing herself, with a wan little smile. "Still, I should have thought my father had no right to treat me as he does. He knocked me down one day."

"Did he, the brute?" and Sir Rawdon's eyes flashed. "Was anyone present, Winifred?"

"No; Mrs. Monk did not come into the room till afterwards."

"Then you could not prove the assault: it would be your word against his, and under the circumstances I fear the magistrate would allow him the benefit of the doubt. There is only one way in which I can release you from his tyranny. Give yourself to me, and you shall never repent your trust. I am sure that I can make you happy."

Winifred shrank back as Sir Rawdon bent towards her, a glittering light in his dark eyes. There was a fierce, pent-up passion in his looks which filled her with shuddering dread and terror.

"I must tell you something, Sir Rawdon," she said in a low tone. "The afternoon when you proposed to poor Lilius in the bay, I was behind the rocks, and I heard every word you said. You were in earnest then if ever man was, and you told her of a curse which always fell upon those you loved best in the world. She did not believe in it, but four months after her marriage she was dead. Have you broken the spell, or am I of so little consequence that you do not care what may befall me?"

Sir Rawdon's face turned livid under her words, and, for

a moment, his eyes fell in confusion before the girl's clear gaze; then, with an effort recovering his composure, he exclaimed passionately:

"I have grown wiser since those days, Winifred. I love you with all my heart and soul, and am confident in my power to shield and protect you."

"It is possible," answered Winifred gravely, "but pray, pray, put the thought out of your mind. I shall never marry you, Sir Rawdon. On my honour, I would rather die."

"Why, why, why?" he reiterated passionately. "What have I ever done, that you should dislike me so bitterly?"

She shrank away from him on her chair. It had not occurred to Sir Rawdon to release her from her bonds, and she was powerless to escape his compelling masterful gaze.

"I am not sure that I dislike you," she said slowly and reluctantly, "but I have been afraid of you ever since I first saw you. It makes me shudder when you come near me, and I cannot bear to be left alone with you. I daresay it is foolish, but the feeling is much too strong for me to conquer. I would rather,"—and the blood rushed to her pale face,—"I would rather suffer any fate, except the one to which my father doomed me, than become your wife. If I must die, I would rather not die of terror."

And to her intense relief, at this moment the tête-à-tête was interrupted by the return of Flowers, who straightway consigned his daughter to Mrs. Monk to be conducted back to her prison.

CHAPTER XX.

How Winifred kept her Vow.

EXCEPT that she was called upon to undergo no more interviews with smooth-tongued managers, Winifred found her position considerably altered for the worse by Sir Rawdon's interference. Apparently stimulated by his desire to secure the promised £500 from the baronet on his daughter's marriage, Flowers surpassed himself in fiendish ingenuity for devising means to harass and torment his victim. He kept her in his room for the greater part of the day, making her recite for the sole purpose of mocking her performance, copy out parts, add up endless columns of figures, or perform any irksome task which he fancied she would most dislike. He had the love of a genuine bully for the sight and infliction of pain, and succeeded beyond his own knowledge in making the girl's life a burden to her; for Winifred's pride was up in arms, and she would sooner have died than have betrayed her suffering to her father's cynical gaze. Mrs. Monk also developed a new and surprising capacity for subjecting her prisoner to petty annoyances and indignities, and added to the mental torture which Sir Rawdon's news of Gerald had caused her, Winifred's lot became so utterly wretched that death itself would have come as a welcome release. Yet she never for a moment thought of purchasing freedom by accepting Sir Rawdon's offer; she even took a sort of pleasure in feeling that her spirit was stronger than the malice of her gaolers, and that, weak girl as she was, they were powerless to coerce her will.

The weeks passed on, and Winifred altogether lost count of time. One day was exactly like another, except that on Sundays she had a blessed respite from being summoned to her father's presence, and was given theological books, of Mrs. Monk's choosing, to study instead of plays. The winter was fortunately not very severe, but after her sheltered life at Beechhaven, Winifred suffered keenly from the cold.

"Why are the church bells ringing?" she asked the housekeeper one morning. "It is not Sunday, is it?"

"No, it is Christmas Day," returned Mrs. Monk dryly, and when Winifred had fulfilled her morning tasks, she found herself left to her own devices in solitary confinement for the rest of the day.

Having neither books nor paper to occupy the time, she paced up and down the fireless room trying to get a little warmth into her chilled feet, while her thoughts flew to their natural loadstone, Beechhaven Cottage and the dear ones under its roof. However deeply displeased with her, she thought that on this day they must hold her in kindly remembrance. She recalled the incidents of the happy Christmas Days she had spent at Beechhaven from the first, when, at Gerald's bidding the night before, she had hung up her stocking, to wake in the mysterious dawning in wondering anticipation, and discover it filled with toys and sweetmeats, to the last, when she had walked with Gerald to early service at Dering Church, and returned to find her breakfast-plate loaded with presents, exactly the things she wanted most. Every joy and pleasure in her life had come to her through Gerald and his mother, and Winifred loved them both with the whole strength of her deep warm-hearted nature. Of course Mrs. Daubeny held a different place in the girl's estimation, but it was second only to her son. No one in the world could be like Gerald, and from the moment when he had stepped between her and her angry father, Winifred had

regarded him with a very passion of gratitude and devotion, which had grown with her growth, passing insensibly from the hero-worship of her childhood to a woman's strongest and most perfect love. She had never suspected the change, nor the true nature of her feelings, until Flowers' coarse hand had rudely snatched the veil from her eyes, and then she had felt she could lie down and die in perfect contentment if she only knew that Gerald loved her. This hope had been taken from her by Sir Rawdon's words. Gerald could not love her if he were so seriously displeased with her. She knew by her own feelings that nothing could make her really angry with him, but she experienced no throb of resentment at his behaviour. She told herself she had given him just cause for indignation ; she had been right in her surrender to her father, but she saw now that, carried away by her impulsive excitement, she had acted with foolish haste. Of course she had owed it to Gerald to inform him in the first place of her intention ; and now, nearly two months had passed, for it was the first week in November when she came to England, and not a line had she been able to send him. The girl wrung her hands despairingly over her helplessness. If only she could write freely to Mrs. Daubeny, if only she could know what was happening at Beechhaven, and be assured of Gerald's well being, she felt that her own imprisonment would be comparatively easy to bear. She was so utterly worn out and desponding, that her meditations soon ended in tears, and when, late in the evening, Mrs. Monk returned to the room, it was to find her charge had cried herself to sleep on her bed.

New Year's Day came and went without bringing one friendly word or kindly greeting to the prisoner at Willow Lodge. Sir Rawdon never visited her, but from time to time Flowers let fall words which implied that the baronet had renewed his proposal in the hope that the girl might be

induced to yield. Her health began to succumb to the severities practised upon her, and a racking cough disturbed her sleep during the few hours allowed her for repose. The winter months passed, and March found her worn to the very shadow of her former self, but strong as ever in her resolution to die in her prison sooner than become Sir Rawdon's wife.

One afternoon, towards the middle of March, Winifred noticed on entering her father's room, that he was evidently more than half drunk, and, to her secret alarm, he kept on mixing himself glasses of spirits from a decanter on a side-table. She hoped that Mrs. Monk was as usual on the alert, but on this occasion Flowers, instead of becoming savagely irritable as the liquor mounted to his brain, fell into a surprising vein of maudlin cheerfulness and good-humour. He even bade Winifred cease that "dashed writing," and draw her chair to the fire, an order which she was only too thankful to obey, although she kept watchfully beyond reach of her father's arm.

"Keep it up, my girl, keep it up," he roared out jovially. "Blest if you are not worth your weight to me in gold. Who would have thought there was so much stuff in a little white-faced chit like you? If I had nabbed you at Beechhaven, and you had knocked under to the old boy at once, it wouldn't have been half the money in my pocket. Keep it up," and he gulped down another glass of spirits. "Hanged if it isn't a first-rate joke, that with all his brains and cash he can't get the better of a slip of a girl. Ha! ha! it was a pretty piece of acting; he played up to me confounded well. He's a dashed loss to the profession, is Sir Rawdon. So anxious for your comfort, and offering to set you free if your brute of a father didn't object; and the moment you were out of the room telling me to put on the screw, and make it as warm for you as I could, for he must have you at all costs. Ha! ha! What are you

staring at me for, you little fool? It's true as I live. A put-up job from first to last. I was in a darned bad way last spring, when in marched the old boy with his head in the air. 'You have got a daughter, Winifred, whom you sold when she was nine years old,' he said. 'Right you are,' said I, 'though how you know it, beats me,' for I was down on my luck, living under an *alias*. 'You have been traced through this,' he said, and showed me a dashed ugly face in a pocket-book; but it was me, sure enough, as like as the ministers' portraits in *Punch*. 'I want your daughter,' he said, 'and if you will act under my instructions, you shall be no loser by the affair.' No loser, should think I wasn't just! I soon found I had a mad lover to deal with—no fool like an old fool—and I drove a hard enough bargain, besides the joke of selling the folks all round, from the Judge to that cursed Daubeny. Ha! ha! Sir Rawdon scents a rival, and doesn't exactly love his handsome nephew."

His voice died away in incoherent mutterings and chuckles, and he fell asleep in the chair with his mouth wide open. Winifred eyed him in unspeakable horror and disgust. She could hardly doubt that in his drunken confidences he had told her the truth, for it explained everything that had been dark to her before. The pains and cost Flowers had spent upon securing her person, the solitary house to which she had been brought, and the constant presence of her watchful guardian Mrs. Monk; Sir Rawdon's extraordinarily opportune arrival during her scene with her father, and the ready manner in which he had acquiesced in Flowers' tyranny. Doubtless, she thought, he had intended to imitate his nephew's conduct, and win her gratitude by appearing as her protector against her father's brutality. Winifred's blood boiled with indignation as she remembered that the proposal of Mr. Dixon must be also part of the plot, and the so-called manager had been merely hired to perform his part. She could never have

credited Sir Rawdon with such heartless cold-blooded cruelty. It was he then who had banished her from Beechhaven, who had doomed Gerald to prison, who had instigated all the hardships she had suffered at Willow Lodge, and who had, as she now felt, maligned Gerald to her. Her heart bounded at the thought. It was not true then; she need not trust Sir Rawdon's words: Gerald was not seriously angry with her as his uncle had represented, and in the joy and relief of the discovery, Winifred forgot Sir Rawdon and her wrongs, and fell into a happy reverie in which Gerald's face again looked at her with the unclouded eyes and kindly smile of old. Poor child! it was the last time her prison life was to be cheered with sunny day-dreams.

Unusually early the next morning she received a summons to the sitting-room, where she found Sir Rawdon in conversation with her father. Flushing crimson, she drew back, ignoring the hand which he held out to greet her, but Sir Rawdon was so occupied in gazing at her face that he did not appear to notice her behaviour.

"Good Heavens! Winifred, you look half starved!" he exclaimed in a startled tone. "What have they been doing to you, child?"

"Only carrying out your orders," returned the girl coldly. "I certainly have every reason to be grateful to you, Sir Rawdon, for the treatment I have received in your house."

She glanced as she spoke from Sir Rawdon to her father, and perceived in a moment that her words had hit the truth. For the first time within her memory a faint flush illuminated the baronet's pale face, and Flowers looked furious and confused.

"She is stark mad," muttered the latter angrily. "What do you mean, you jade?" and he advanced upon Winifred with uplifted hand.

"Stand back!" exclaimed Sir Rawdon sharply. "Do you think I am going to let you bully her before my very eyes?"

"You prefer it being done behind your back," said Winifred in the same chilling tone. "Is it necessary, Sir Rawdon, to keep up the farce any longer? I learned the whole truth from my father yesterday afternoon, when he was too tipsy to know what he was saying, and I understand now how much cause I have to be indebted to your disinterested kindness."

"It is a lie!" shouted Flowers excitedly. "A dashed impudent lie! I never told her anything."

Winifred disdained reply. She stood drawn up to her full height, her little figure invested, in her strength of scorn and fiery indignation, with a fearless dignity before which Sir Rawdon fairly quailed. He had intended to carry the matter with a high hand and affect total ignorance of her meaning, but for once their positions seemed reversed. He could not face the girl, invincible in the might of her outraged womanhood; her clear eyes seemed to read into his soul; he saw that she would give no credit to his denial, and with his usual prompt decision he resolved to accept and justify the onus of his conduct.

"It is true, Winifred; but I have been driven to act in this fashion solely by my love for you. I saw you were too wrapped up in the Daubenys and Beechhaven, ever to leave them of your own accord. I knew I should have had no chance of winning you there, and you were certainly intended for higher things than to become the wife of a clerk in a provincial bank. I have been cruel only to be kind. How could I tell that you would show such obstinacy, and compel me to resort to measures which I neither intended nor desired? Believe me, I would have spared you if I could. My heart has bled for you, and I have suffered in the necessity as much

as you yourself; but I love you to distraction, and while I live no other man shall ever call you wife."

"Love!" she repeated with a scorn before which his burning gaze fell in confusion. "You dare to talk to me of *love!* You, who have caused the imprisonment and ruin of the best friend I have in the world; you, by whose orders I have been starved and beaten, and kept without warmth and sleep! See, here is a specimen of your *love*," and she rolled back her sleeve to the elbow, revealing her thin wasted arm, the white skin completely scored and discoloured by weals and bruises. "My arm used to be smooth and round; look at it now! The cuts are from my father's whip; the bruises he made by twisting and pinching my skin—all by your orders, Sir Rawdon. I am not likely to forget in a hurry the tokens I have received of your *love*. I think you are a fiend in human shape, and are wooing me in the fashion nearest your heart."

And the terrible fit of coughing which cut short her words startled Sir Rawdon even more than the actual sight of her injuries.

"Winifred, upon my soul, you do me injustice," he cried passionately. "I never realised how they were treating you. I never for a moment sanctioned this monstrous cruelty."

"No?" she said with quiet irony. "You did not then, after our last interview, tell my father to put on the screw, and make it as warm for me as he could, because you must have me at all costs?"

"I may have used the words, for I was distracted by your resistance; but, before God, I never meant you to be treated like this. My darling, forgive me. I swear to you my love shall make amends for all you have suffered. You must see the uselessness of further resistance; only consent to be my wife, and there is nothing in the world I could refuse you. I will be your slave, your —"

The girl stopped him by a gesture of infinite disdain.

"I am in your power, Sir Rawdon; but if you have not lost every instinct of a gentleman, you will, at least, spare me the insult of listening to these protestations. You can torture me as you please, but do not degrade the name of love by using it as a cloak for your cruelty and wickedness. If you have nothing more to say to me, perhaps you will allow me to go back to my room."

"Winifred, think for one moment," he entreated. "You have been here now little more than four months. It will be two more before you are eighteen, and then three years, thirty-six months, before you attain your majority. You cannot hold out all that time, it is impossible. Of course, I shall see that you are better treated; but my will is as strong as yours, and you shall not leave this house until you have promised to marry me. Thirty-eight months imprisonment must break down your resolution, so why not yield at once, and let me make up to you for the past? Think of it, Winifred."

"I shall probably die long before thirty-eight months have passed," she answered coldly; "but if I live, and no help comes to free me, you will find me on the last day in the same mind I am in now. I would rather be imprisoned here for life than marry you. I no longer fear you—I despise you."

The tone in which she pronounced the last three words would have carried dismay to the breast of the doughtiest lover. Hate, anger, defiance, may be subdued by love, but cold, sovereign contempt is poor ground to nourish Cupid's capricious flower. Sir Rawdon, however, merely regarded the speaker with his curious inscrutable smile.

"Very well," he said; "but before I accept your answer as final, I must beg you to do me the favour of reading this letter," and taking an envelope from his pocket-book, he offered it to Winifred.

She saw that it was addressed to the baronet in Mrs. Daubeny's handwriting, and opened it eagerly.

"My dear Rawdon,—You have probably heard of our difficulties; and, although Gerald shrinks from applying to you for assistance, I feel that the time has come to acquaint you with our position. Since Gerald's dismissal from the bank last summer, we have had nothing to depend on but my small income, which does not suffice for our support. Then came the legal expenses and costs, which, as you know, were tremendous. To defray them Gerald had to go to the money-lenders, and could only get very bad terms. I don't understand the ins and outs of the business, but they have refused to renew their bills, and we are threatened with bailiffs in the house and the sale of our furniture. My own relatives have already assisted us as far as they are able, and I have not the face to apply to them again. Gerald has failed utterly in his search for employment, and unless you can help us, I really don't know what will become of us."

There was more in the same strain; and Winifred sank into a chair as she read on with white distressed face, all the strength and courage taken out of her by the unexpected blow. When she had finished, she looked up at Sir Rawdon, who was watching her with a keen, searching gaze.

"Of course you are going to help them?" she said earnestly.

"That," he answered quietly, "must depend on you."

"On me?"

"Yes. I have brought that letter here before I answered it. If you refuse to take pity on me, I will refuse to take pity on your friends. If, on the contrary, you consent to be my wife, I have already told you I will grant any wish you may express."

Winifred looked at him in growing horror and amazement.

"I say nothing of your conduct to me, Sir Rawdon, but you cannot surely be so lost to all sense of decency as to visit my refusal on your relations. The whole world will cry shame on you if you decline to help them."

"The world is not quite so tender-hearted as you imagine, but I care nothing for its opinion, absolutely nothing. I hate Gerald because you care for him; and, of my own accord, I would not lift a finger to save him from ruin. In fact, I may tell you, I have done my utmost to hasten the catastrophe by getting him the sack from the bank, giving a hint to the money-lenders, and putting my spoke in the wheel of each situation he has tried for since. I have had him watched, and every step he has taken has been reported to me. You can judge therefore if I am likely to help him now, unless you force me to it by accepting my offer."

Sir Rawdon's callous indifference, and cynical avowal of his sentiments, inspired Winifred with unutterable disgust. She would sooner have caressed a toad or snake than suffered him to draw near and take her hand. It was impossible, revoltingly impossible, that she could ever bring herself to accept his terms; and yet, to allow the Daubenys to be turned out of their home, and cast penniless upon the world, when it lay in her power to avert the disaster by a word. It was in defending his ward that Gerald had been brought to his present position; by every claim of right and justice it was her bounden duty to aid them, even if her heart had claimed no voice in the matter. But the cost! Winifred's whole nature recoiled with shuddering horror and dismay. She could not pay the price demanded from her. It was an effort which it was beyond her power to make. Covering her face with her hands, she sank back in her chair. Neither of the two men spoke or moved, and in the stillness she could hear the beating of her own heart. Flowers was awaiting with evident interest the termination of this singular duel,

and Sir Rawdon stood, a prey to the keenest anxiety, convulsively grasping the back of a chair. He had played his last card, and was calculating strongly on the girl's warm heart and generous impulses; but if the appeal failed to move her, he knew that by no other means would he succeed in winning her consent.

The March wind moaned round the house, but the silence remained unbroken by any sound within the room. Winifred's brain seemed reeling; she had no power of coherent thought. Before her mental vision stood, as it were, a loathsome form of horror beckoning to her from a place of tombs, and an inward voice kept bidding her obey the ghastly summons. Yet her physical repulsion was so great, that her strength of will was powerless to enforce submission on her shrinking senses. Death, in any form, she would have faced without hesitation, happy that it was permitted her, at the cost of life itself, to bring help to those she loved; but her horror of Sir Rawdon was augmented tenfold by the discovery of the heartless selfishness which lay beneath his mask of courtesy. She could not pledge herself before God's altar to love and honour such a man as he. She must refuse. Gerald himself would be the first to dissuade her from buying his safety by selling herself to such a fate. And then, just as she had determined on giving a reply in the negative, there stole upon her senses a sweet, heavy perfume, which transported her in a moment from the close room, reeking with the fumes of tobacco and spirits, to the walled garden at The Towers, and recalled the fresh, soft breath of the summer night, and the moonbeams falling in checkered bands upon the path. It was only the scent of the tuberose in Sir Rawdon's buttonhole, distilled by the warmth of the fire; but in the girl's mind it awakened instant association with the kindred fragrance of the starry blossoms she had watched with Gerald in the moonlight, and in a moment brought back

to her the recollection of his love and sacrifice—of all he had, without a murmur, renounced for her sake. The fulfilment of her vow now lay clear and distinct before her, and she was weakly shrinking from the cost. Winifred's whole soul went forth in one wild voiceless prayer for strength to do her duty; then she lifted her head, and looked at Sir Rawdon with a face from which every trace of natural colour had fled, while her eyes, sunken in their black hollows, shone with a strange unnatural brilliancy.

"If you agree to my conditions—I will—accept your terms."

"And what are your conditions?" he asked with a passionate joy he could not keep out of his voice.

"In the first place you will write at once to Mrs. Daubeny, inquiring the amount of Gerald's debts, and promising to pay them immediately—not as a loan, but as a gift; secondly, before I marry you, you will sign a deed giving Gerald the allowance of £1,000 a year for his life; thirdly, you are not to touch me, nor remain alone with me in the room, until I am your wife."

"I agree to them all."

"If you break one of them," said Winifred, suspicious of the prompt readiness of his compliance, "I shall refuse to keep my word to you."

"Then you promise to be my wife on those conditions?"

"I do."

Her tone was firm, if forced. She had taken the plunge, and the period of suspense was over. Henceforth life would be to her a very charnel-house of horror; but she had kept her vow, and Gerald's home and well-being were at last secured to him.

"When will you marry me?"

"As soon as I know that Gerald's debts are paid."

"We will say a month from this time—in Easter week," said Sir Rawdon eagerly, scarcely yet able to believe in the reality of his victory.

"Very well. And now will you write the letter?"

"What letter?"

"To Mrs. Daubeny. I must read it, and see it posted."

"You do not trust my word?" he said haughtily.

"No," replied Winifred, turning her brilliant eyes upon his face. "I do not trust your word, Sir Rawdon; you need scarcely ask me why."

She had risen, and stood with one hand resting on the back of the chair, so calmly resolute and dignified that he felt abashed before her.

"I will write," he said, seating himself at the table; "and I should like you also to write and inform Mrs. Daubeny of our engagement. But look here, Winifred," and he glanced up sharply, "you must make no complaints of me, or say anything which will bring that fellow Gerald here after you. I can't have that, you know. You had better give no address at all."

"You need not fear," she said, in the same cold, even tone. "I know what my submission involves, and what is due to you as—my future husband."

The faintest catch was perceptible in her voice before uttering the three last words; but she seated herself opposite to him at the table, and took up a pen with a composure that surprised Sir Rawdon. He did not know what to make of this cold self-possession: he would have preferred tears and reproaches; but the icy hand of Despair was clutching at Winifred's heart, and all feeling seemed dead within her.

"My dearest Mrs. Daubeny" (she wrote; she no longer dared to use the sweet name, Mother),—"I hope you and Gerald were not very vexed with me for giving myself up. When I knew the truth, I felt I could not act otherwise than I did. I have often

thought of you through the winter, and wished myself back at the dear home; but my father would not let me write to you, and I have been working very hard studying for the stage. However, that is all over now. I have some news for you, which I think will surprise you; but I have only made up my mind after very great consideration. Some time ago Sir Rawdon came to see me, and the end of it is that my father has consented, and I am going to be his wife. We shall probably be married in Easter week, and I hope he will soon afterwards take me to see you at Beechhaven. I can never thank you and Gerald sufficiently for your great goodness to me. Sir Rawdon is writing also, so I will only send my love, and remain ever,

“Your loving child,

“WINIFRED.”

She gave it to Sir Rawdon when she had finished, who read it, nodded, and handed her his own in return. He had acknowledged his sister-in-law’s letter, expressed his willingness to assist her, inquired the amount required, and then passed on to a glowing account of his love for Winifred, and his happiness at being enabled to rescue her from her father’s tyranny and the drudgery of a profession which she disliked. He had, he said, squared the matter with Flowers, and secured his consent to a speedy marriage, when it would be his one desire to promote the happiness of his charming little bride.

Winifred’s lip curled as she read, but she only remarked :

“You might have made your offer of assistance a little more definite, I think.”

“I cannot until I receive a correct statement of his affairs from Gerald. My sister-in-law’s letter is as unbusiness-like as herself. You shall see his answer when it comes.”

He folded the two letters, placed them in one envelope, and directed it to Mrs. Daubeny. Winifred watched him, and then rose from her chair.

"I suppose I have your permission, Sir Rawdon, to go to the post with Mrs. Monk?"

"Your cough is too bad to go out," he said, looking at her with a searching gaze.

"It is no worse than usual, and I have been out almost every day in the garden."

"Very well; I will accompany you," he said. "Mrs. Monk can come also, if you prefer it; but until our marriage, Winifred, I do not wish you to leave the house and garden. Dressmakers and people of that sort can come to you here. Of course you will be no longer watched. Will you give me your word of honour to make no attempt to escape?"

"I should have thought that was included in my promise of marriage," she answered coldly; "but I give you my word, as you wish it. I will make no attempt to escape."

"Nor to communicate with the Daubenys?"

"Not without your sanction."

He rang the bell, and Mrs. Monk appeared to answer it.

"I have to inform you," said Sir Rawdon, "that this young lady has consented to be my wife. You will therefore treat her with all obedience and respect as the future Lady Daubeny."

The housekeeper's cold hazel eyes were lifted for a moment to Winifred's face, but she replied, "Yes, Sir Rawdon," in her usual unmoved tone.

"I would rather you kept your present room, if you have no objection, Winifred," he continued. "The room next to your bedroom has been arranged as a sitting-room for you."

The girl quietly acquiesced. Everything seemed a matter of perfect indifference to her now. Her one anxiety was for the safety of Mrs. Daubeny's letter, from which she had never taken her eyes since Sir Rawdon had laid it on the table. He gave further orders to the housekeeper, bidding her dress herself to go out, and bring down Miss Winifred's

things. Then perceiving Winifred's watchful gaze fixed on the letter, he turned and put it into her hands.

"Do not fear, Winifred, I will deal truly by you; but if it is any satisfaction to you, you shall post it yourself."

And as soon as Mrs. Monk had accomplished her errand, he held the door open for Winifred to pass through.

"Well, I am blowed!" ejaculated Flowers, who, secretly a trifle in awe of Sir Rawdon, had considered it his safest policy to discreetly hold his tongue. "The old boy is as sharp as a knife. I could have sworn the girl would never have knocked under to him, after kicking up a shindy fit to bring the house down. A pretty piece of acting too. Shows what she can do when she chooses. She is a deep one, and she hates the man like poison. He had better look after her when he has got her. The jade means mischief, or I am much mistaken."

CHAPTER XXI.

A Turn of Fortune's Wheel.



WITH the precious letter clasped tightly in her hand, Winifred stepped over the threshold of Willow Lodge, which she had never crossed since that dull November day when she had been led by her father into the house. She did not think of that now; she scarcely felt the novel change of finding herself in the outer world after more than four months' imprisonment. The rows of yellow-brick houses excited no sensations in her mind. Her one desire was to place her letter in safety. Beyond that point her ideas did not attempt to range. Walking in perfect silence between Sir Rawdon and the housekeeper's prim, irreproachable figure, a pillar-box soon appeared in view, and she dropped the letter inside, stopping to read when the box would next be cleared. Then she turned as if to retrace her steps.

"Would you like to take a further walk?" asked Sir Rawdon. "I have no objection, as I am with you."

"No, thank you; I would rather go straight back and remain quiet. I am tired," she answered, with a little quiver in her voice, and without a word he accompanied her back to the house.

"Good-bye, Winifred," he said, pausing at the door of Flowers' room, and rigidly observing her conditions by refraining from offering his hand. "Give your orders to Mrs. Monk for anything you may require. I shall come and see you to-morrow."

"Good-bye," she said, in the same quiet, expressionless

voice, and, followed by the housekeeper, she walked upstairs to her room, where, out of sheer force of habit, having put away her things, she stood passively awaiting her ex-gaoler's commands.

"You had better come into your sitting-room," said Mrs. Monk, perceiving the state of the case; and she ushered the girl into a room where a bright fire was burning on the hearth, and a sofa and easy-chair were drawn temptingly near the blaze.

Here, neatly arranged on the tables and shelves, Winifred found all the possessions of which she had been deprived on her arrival at the house, even to the *bonbonnière* and the pot of honey, but she looked at them with tired, listless eyes, for they spoke to her of tenderness, love, and home; and what had she to do with such things now? From the photograph-case, once her dearest treasure, she turned with a positive shudder, and throwing herself into the chair, sat gazing wearily into the fire. She felt no sharp stabs of pain, no wild rebellion against her accepted fate. She had accepted it, and with the act the bitterness of death seemed past. Her heart was numb and cold, as if it had indeed been frozen into ice, and she was only conscious of a dull sense of relief at finding herself alone and unobserved. When, some time later, Mrs. Monk brought up her dinner, Winifred tried in vain to eat.

"I can't swallow," she said, laying down her knife and fork with an appealing look at her stern guardian; and faithful to her orders, Mrs. Monk merely replied:

"Very well, Miss Winifred," and bore the tray away; while with a sigh of relief, Winifred returned to the arm-chair and her weary brooding—it could hardly be called thought.

From time to time Jane came in to make up the fire, and at five o'clock Mrs. Monk herself brought up a tea-tray, the

first afternoon tea Winifred had tasted since her flight from Beechhaven Cottage, for it had been a forbidden luxury to the prisoner at Willow Lodge. She drank a cup of tea, but refused to eat anything, and Mrs. Monk gave her a sharp glance as she left the room. She had been used to seeing a look of positive starvation in the girl's eyes; and only the day before, when Winifred had been deprived on some pretext of her dinner, she had eaten, as if famished, her supper of thin gruel purposely burnt in the cooking. It was a curious change to turn in utter distaste from palatable, well-cooked food.

All the evening Winifred sat with the same look and attitude; and when Mrs. Monk brought up her supper she refused to eat it, and asked permission to go to bed.

The housekeeper made no remark, but when, from utter weariness, Winifred had fallen asleep, she shaded her candle with her hand and stood looking at the pale face on the pillow, with its deep hollows under the eyes and thin, sunken cheeks.

"If Sir Rawdon does not take care," she thought, as she turned away, "the girl will slip through his fingers after all."

In the middle of the night Mrs. Monk was awakened by a scream of such mortal fear and anguish that it thrilled even her phlegmatic nerves, and hastily striking a light, she looked across at the other bed. Winifred was sitting up, her hands stretched out as if to ward off the approach of some object of terror, while her eyes gazed straight before her with a look of unutterable loathing and horror.

"Winifred!" said the housekeeper harshly, getting out of bed with unusual haste, "what do you mean by screaming like that? What are you looking at?"

"There, there!—the clock!" answered the girl in a strange, breathless whisper. "Look, it is grinning! It knows I shall soon be in its power. Oh, save me! save me!"

She uttered another terrified cry, and Mrs. Monk roughly seized her shoulder.

"Have done with this nonsense," she exclaimed, shaking the girl till the teeth chattered in her head. "Wake up, you are dreaming!"

And indeed, when released, Winifred looked about her with such evident bewilderment that it was clear she had been abruptly roused from sleep.

"What is the matter, Mrs. Monk?" she asked in her ordinary tone. "What have I been doing?"

"Doing?" said the housekeeper with asperity. "Screaming as if you were being murdered, and talking gibberish about a clock. If you are going to indulge in such vagaries as these, the sooner you are married the better I shall be pleased."

"Ah! I know now: it was only a dream, then!" and she gazed with startled eyes about the room. "It was too horrible!" and she shuddered violently. "I shall never dare to go to sleep again, for fear it should come back. What time is it? May I get up and dress?"

"Certainly not; it is only half-past one. I will leave the light burning if you wish it."

"May I come into your bed, then?" asked Winifred desperately. "Indeed, I will lie quite still. If I stay here alone, I am sure I shall go mad with fright."

With cold contempt the housekeeper acquiesced, and was soon placidly snoring as before, while Winifred lay with wide-open eyes, recalling every incident of the ghastly dream, in which she had found herself a helpless victim, trying vainly to flee from a form of horror which assumed the shape of her childhood's terror, the old clock at "The Duke's Head" Inn. She had never forgotten its appearance nor the shrinking dread with which it had inspired her, but it had become to her as an episode of the past, and had never haunted her

dreams since the last night, now six years ago, which she had passed at Lynscombe Towers. If anything could have added to the shrinking repugnance with which she regarded her approaching fate, it was the ominous fact that this ghastly form should have again appeared to her on the first night of her betrothal to Sir Rawdon. Afraid to close her eyes again, and with small inclination for sleep, she lay wide awake, listening to the chimes of a church clock in the distance striking the hours, until, with her unfailing punctuality, Mrs. Monk woke precisely at five o'clock, and rose, as usual, to her day's work.

"You had better stay where you are, and go to sleep again," she said to Winifred. "There is no need for you to get up now."

The girl made no objection. Daylight was coming, and the vision which had scared her must surely pass with the night; but she did not sleep. She lay with open eyes staring at the whitewashed wall, as the grey dawn stole into the room, while her imagination was busy picturing the scenes of her future life. She felt convinced that death in some form must await her when she had become Sir Rawdon's wife, but in what fashion would it come? while she wondered dreamily if the dreadful mystery would first be unravelled to her which she was certain connected her future husband with the clock at "The Duke's Head" Inn.

About the middle of the morning Sir Rawdon came up to her sitting-room, accompanied by Mrs. Monk.

"Good-morning, Winifred. This really will not do," he said gravely. "Mrs. Monk tells me you have been eating nothing at all."

"I am very sorry," she said quietly. "I really tried, but something came up in my throat and prevented me from swallowing, and I am not the least hungry now."

"But at least you can drink. Mrs. Monk, go downstairs

and order some strong beef-tea to be made at once, and give Miss Winifred port wine and beaten up eggs, or anything strengthening, every two hours. You will try and drink them, Winifred?"

"I will, if you wish it," she answered wearily.

He went towards the door on the housekeeper's departure, but paused on the threshold.

"Do you mind my staying here till Mrs. Monk comes back?" he asked. "She won't be a minute."

"Not if you will stay by the door." Then, moved by a sudden impulse of curiosity, Winifred added, "Who is Mrs. Monk, Sir Rawdon?"

"A widow and a most respectable person. She was for many years matron of the Killingworth School, but had lately retired into private life, when she consented, for a consideration, to enter my service for a short time."

"And Jane?"

"Mrs. Monk engaged her. I believe she knows some secret about the young woman which makes her so subservient, but it is no affair of mine. Mrs. Monk answered for her silence and secrecy, and I have had no reason to doubt them."

The housekeeper returned at this moment, and Sir Rawdon drew nearer to the fire, watching Winifred's white listless face and drooping figure lying back in the large arm-chair.

"Why don't you draw?" he asked. "I had that table placed in a good light on purpose for you."

"Why should I?" she answered in a spiritless tone. "I have nothing to work for now."

"But I thought you were so fond of drawing? You would be better if you had some occupation. Will you draw something for me?"

"If you wish it, Sir Rawdon."

She always addressed him with the same indifference, the same gentle submission. He began to wish she would show a little scorn or anger; anything to break this unnatural composure. He had desired to tame her high spirit, but not to crush her so utterly to the ground.

Before he left, he took a case from his pocket and showed Winifred a magnificent half-hoop of brilliants.

"This is our engagement ring," he said. "May I put it on your finger, Winifred?"

"I will put it on myself," she answered coldly; and as he laid it beside her chair, she took it from the case and, with a shiver she could not repress, slipped it on the third finger of her left hand.

And long after Sir Rawdon had gone away, she sat with a look of acute suffering and misery in her eyes, watching the firelight play upon the diamonds as if they were living flames and burnt the finger they encircled.

On Sir Rawdon's return the next morning, he was way-laid by Mrs. Monk.

"If you please, Sir Rawdon, I must send for a sleeping draught for Miss Winifred. It was all I could do to induce her last night to go to bed at all; and she had hardly been asleep five minutes when she started up screaming, and went raving on about a clock, just as she did the night before, and to my belief not another wink of sleep did she get till morning."

"Send for a draught then," he said, and walked upstairs to the sitting-room, where he was relieved to see Winifred with a brush in her hand bending over a sketch.

"May I see what you have done?" he asked, and after putting in a few more touches, she handed him the drawing without a word.

He gave such a start that he almost dropped it, his brows drew together, and a sudden gleam shone in his eyes. He

opened his lips as if to speak, but no sound came, and it seemed necessary to clear his throat violently several times before he inquired in a hoarse tone :

“ What is this ? ”

“ The old clock in the parlour at ‘ The Duke’s Head ’ Inn,” she answered steadily. “ I have been dreaming about it lately; so I thought I would see how it would look in a picture, and if I could lay the spectre by giving it tangible form.”

He bent a searching glance upon her, and laying down the sketch, remarked with affected carelessness :

“ I remember now, I have seen the clock you speak of. A curious thing to haunt your dreams. I hope the remedy may be effectual. Here is a letter for you, Winifred, from Eleanor Daubeny. It was enclosed to me at my club.”

Winifred took it eagerly; the envelope had not been opened, and her heart fluttered with a vague trembling hope, but the contents proved a bitter disappointment. Mrs. Daubeny was evidently annoyed, and wrote shortly and coldly :

“ My dear Winifred,—Your news certainly came as a great surprise to us, but you ought to be old enough to know your own mind.

“ With our congratulations, and best wishes for your future happiness,

“ Believe me,

“ Yours affectionately,

“ ELEANOR DAUBENY.”

That was all, and it cost Winifred no small effort to retain her composure before Sir Rawdon’s critical eyes. She would not for the world have broken down in his presence; but the moment he had departed, she threw herself on the sofa and buried her face in the cushions. The blow was unexpected; for she had vaguely fancied that Gerald’s mother would read

between the lines of her letter, and form some suspicion of the truth. It was hard to be misjudged and condemned by the very friends for whose sake she was sacrificing more than life itself.

"And they can never know the truth," she thought bitterly. "Even if I see them, I shall have no right to betray my husband. I wonder if I could write a letter to be given to them after my death."

She began to think what she would say, and calmed down a little in the mental composition, but no tears came to her relief. Her eyes were dry and burning, and her brows ached with a sharp splitting pain, as if an iron band were pressing on her temples.

"Try and rouse yourself," said Mrs. Monk severely, entering soon afterwards with a cup of beef-tea. "Do you know what will be the end of it if you go on like this, Miss Winifred? You will die before you are married."

"No," replied Winifred quietly; "I shall die afterwards, very soon afterwards you will see, Mrs. Monk, but not before I am married. I know my fate; and besides, I cannot die until Sir Rawdon has carried out the conditions upon which I sold myself, or it would be all of no use; but I wonder—I wonder," she added, with a sudden burst of passionate vehemence, "why I was ever allowed to grow up? It would have been mercy if my father had beaten me to death in my childhood, instead of letting me be saved for this—for this—Oh God!"

She hid her face again in the cushions, while a convulsive shudder ran through her frame, and the homily which Mrs. Monk proceeded to read her on the wickedness and impiety of her words fell on unheeding ears.

Later in the day, with a sudden desire to escape the intolerable pain of her own thoughts, she took up the *Morning Post* from a table which was loaded with novels and periodicals,

when almost the first paragraph to meet her eye contained the announcement of the approaching marriage of Sir Rawdon Daubeny, Bart., of Lynscombe Towers, with Winifred, only daughter of James Flowers, Esq. Sir Rawdon had lost no time in publishing his triumph to the world.

A week went by, and dulled by sleeping draughts, Winifred's nights were no more disturbed by frightful dreams; but in spite of Sir Rawdon's anxious solicitude and Mrs. Monk's grim guardianship, the girl grew, if possible, thinner and paler, her cough was more troublesome, and the lines under her eyes looked black as if marked in ink. She seemed to take no interest in anything, and refused so decidedly to have a trousseau bought for her, that even the wedding dress Mrs. Monk was compelled to order unknown to the bride.

"What is the use of buying new clothes for me?" Winifred asked wearily. "You know I shall not live to wear them. If I dressed to please myself, I would be married in a shroud."

She was seriously uneasy as time went on that Sir Rawdon showed her no papers concerning Gerald's debts; but he was always full of plausible excuses about the affair, with which for the present she was forced to be content.

Early one morning about a fortnight after her engagement, Sir Rawdon was seated at her side in the little upstairs sitting-room, now bright with flowers and ornaments. He was talking in French that their conversation might not be followed by Mrs. Monk, who sat, occupied with her work, grim and upright on a high chair near the door, while Winifred replied to his remarks with the quiet reserve behind which she had entrenched herself from the first, and which all his efforts were powerless to break down. It began to irritate Sir Rawdon that this helpless girl, completely at his mercy, should yet keep him so determinately at arm's length. With unerring instinct she had taken her stand on impregnable

ground. She rendered him perfect courtesy and submission, and gave him no possible cause for complaint, but he felt he had been nearer to the timid child, who had pitied his loneliness on the Beechhaven shore, than he would ever be to this grave cold woman who had promised, under compulsion, to be his wife.

He was talking to her of art, enthusiastically, brilliantly, as he could talk when he pleased; but the girl listened unmoved, replying with perfect politeness, but with not a shade of feeling or interest. He might as well have addressed his remarks to Mrs. Monk for all the response he evoked from the beautiful mournful eyes, once so full of buoyant life and sparkle. It must have been disheartening work, but Sir Rawdon was possessed of a dogged perseverance which seldom failed to secure his aim. Suddenly, however, he broke off in the midst of one of his most impassioned sentences. A sound from below had penetrated to his singularly quick sense of hearing before it reached the ears of Winifred, who glanced up in some surprise at his abrupt silence.

"Who can that be?" he said irritably. "Flowers ought to know better than to bring anyone here."

He rose from his seat, and Winifred now caught the sound of hurried steps ascending the uncarpeted stairs. The door flew open, and Flowers burst hotly into the room, followed more leisurely by a stranger, a slight refined-looking man with fair hair and beard and cold light-blue eyes.

"Dash it all, Sir Rawdon, here's a pretty go!" exclaimed the former excitedly. "If this isn't the blooming father, after all!"

"Are you mad?" said Sir Rawdon sternly, fixing his dark eyes on Flowers' face with a glance that made him quail. "What do you mean by bringing a stranger up to my private room?"

"Blest if I could help it," said Flowers sullenly. "It's Charlie Vavasour himself."

“What?”

A livid hue overspread Sir Rawdon’s features, and he staggered backwards like a man struck in the face by a heavy blow.

“You have forgotten me, Sir Rawdon Daubeny?” said the stranger in a cold hard voice, advancing as he spoke. “I have not forgotton you, nor the circumstances under which we parted.”

“You are labouring under a strange mistake,” said the baronet, recovering himself. “I am not aware of having ever possessed the honour of your acquaintance.”

“No?” said the stranger coolly. “There are some things which it is extremely convenient to forget. However, the length of your memory, Sir Rawdon, is no concern of mine, as I have succeeded in convincing my old friend Flowers of the fact of my identity.”

“And as it is certainly no concern of mine what impression you may make upon the mind of a confirmed drunkard, I fear I must request you, sir, to be good enough to leave my house.”

“With pleasure. I merely warn you that I shall return with police constables to arrest James Flowers on a charge of perjury, and you, Sir Rawdon Daubeny for the murder of my wife.”

“This is certainly some escaped lunatic,” said Sir Rawdon contemptuously, although a close observer might have remarked that his tone was not quite so firm as usual. “You must be out of your senses, Flowers, to let me be annoyed by his ravings. Remove him instantly!”

“I daren’t indeed, Sir Rawdon,” returned Flowers cringing, his bloated face quite pale with dread. “He has men watching the house, and he has got the Brighton certificate. He can run me in any minute he chooses.”

“What proof has he given you of his indentity?”

"I know him a deuced sight too well to want proof," said Flowers moodily; "besides, as to that, it don't matter a hang who he is. If he has got the certificate of the child's death, he can round on us for fraud, without being asked to prove himself the father."

"If he is really the missing Charles Vavasour," said Sir Rawdon coldly, "he must be aware that a warrant was issued for his own arrest."

"Quite so," returned the stranger. "I came to England fully prepared to give myself up if necessary; and I flatter myself that at my trial your cross-examination in the witness box, Sir Rawdon, might cause a slight sensation in court. I have no objection to revealing every detail of my life to the public view. Perhaps you can hardly say the same with yours."

Again the livid look overspread Sir Rawdon's face, and his glance sank under the gaze of the stranger's cold blue eyes.

"What do you want here?" he said hoarsely.

"Now we come to the point," and the gentleman turned towards Winifred, who was watching the strange scene in growing surprise. "Have you ever had any suspicion that Flowers was not your father?" he asked her quietly.

"Not my father?" she repeated in astonishment. "I am afraid he must be, for he proved it when he claimed me."

"He proved that he had a daughter Winifred, born on the 10th of May seventeen years ago; and there was no one conversant with the fact that this child died five weeks after her birth, and was buried in the cemetery at Brighton."

Winifred gazed with bewilderment from the stranger to Flowers, who suffered this singular assertion to pass unquestioned.

"Then who am I?" she said with a dream-like feeling of unreality stealing over her.

" You are the child of a friend of Mr. and Mrs. Flowers, born a month later, and whom they adopted as their own—for what reason, perhaps Mr. Flowers will be good enough to inform us."

" You know your wife and mine were like sisters," said Flowers gruffly. " When Mrs. Vavasour died, my wife was so cut up over the loss of her precious brat, that nothing would do but she must have your infant and bring it up as her own. I let her have her way, for I had no notion you were going to disappear for nearly twenty years, and thought you would come down with something handsome for looking after the child. It was my wife's whim to call it Winifred, after our dead baby, and I never troubled to contradict her when she let everyone think it was our own. If the girl had taken after you and turned out anything of an actress, it would have been worth my while to pass as her real father."

Winifred raised her hand to her head. She had never forgotten the story she had heard at "The Duke's Head" Inn, and the landlady's belief that she herself was Mrs. Vavasour's child. It was true then; and in place of the brutal drunkard, this determined-looking stranger must be her real father, but she was too bewildered to realise all that the discovery involved. She felt her hand taken in a strong firm clasp, and looked up to see him standing at her side.

" You must think me a brute for deserting you," he said, " but I was told you were dead. Will you forgive me, child, for your poor mother's sake? You are her living image."

" But is it really true," she asked earnestly, " and not another plot to deceive me? Although," she added piteously, " I don't know what object Sir Rawdon could have in trying to deceive me now."

" It is true, I swear it," he said, looking across at Sir

Rawdon. "I swear it on your mother's troth. Tell me, child," and he glanced sharply at her wondering face. "Do you love that man?" and he pointed to the baronet.

"No," she said with an emphasis that was stronger than any assent.

"Then why are you engaged to marry him? Have they bullied you into it?"

"Not exactly. The friends who have been kinder to me than anyone else in the world are in great trouble, and Sir Rawdon would not help them unless I promised to marry him."

"Very generous on his part. Well, your engagement is at an end now. I shall not allow it to go on."

"But it must!" she exclaimed in dismay. "I have given him my word, and I cannot break it."

"Wait a moment. By your friends, I suppose you mean Gerald Daubeny and his mother. Did Sir Rawdon promise you to assist them?"

"Yes, it was on that condition that I agreed to marry him."

"Then he has not kept his promise; for the sale of their furniture takes place the end of this week."

The colour flew to Winifred's face, and her eyes flashed like fire.

"Is this true, Sir Rawdon?" she asked, advancing towards him in amazed indignation. "What have you to say?"

"Say! That I hate Gerald, because you love him; and that, even to win you, I could not bring myself to do him a good turn. I would have deceived you to the last, and I swear that while I live you shall never be his wife!"

Winifred looked him full in the face without uttering a single word—looked at him until, before the splendid scorn of her wonder and disdain, his eyes fell, and an expression of

shame stole over his features, convulsed with baffled wrath and passion. Then taking from the third finger of her left hand the diamond hoop by which it was encircled, she cast it at his feet; and, still without a word, turned back to her father's side. She had scarcely reached it before the tumultuous rush of relief and joy proved too much for her weakened frame, and, stepping forward, Charles Vavasour caught his daughter as she fell fainting into his arms.

CHAPTER XXII.

Charles Vavasour's Story.

ABOUT five o'clock on the same afternoon, Gerald Daubeny was walking, with bowed head and dragging steps, down the lane to Beechhaven Cottage. He had done all that man could do in striving to redeem his fallen fortunes, and avert the breaking of the heavy cloud which had gathered over his head, but every effort had failed; and it seemed to him at times as if some implacable enemy were tracking his steps, and blocking every path in which he sought to tread. He had dismissed the idea as absurd; but, from whatever cause, the tide of Fate had set so strongly against him that all his strength and energy proved of no avail, and now the end had come. This was the last night which he and his mother were to spend in the old home. The next day Mrs. Daubeny was to be removed to the house of a relation, who had offered her a temporary asylum, while Gerald, stripped of everything he possessed in the world, and condemned by all his relatives for, what they termed, the obstinate folly which had brought him to this pass, had found himself totally unable to obtain any occupation suitable to his birth and education. By some means he was resolved to earn sufficient to keep himself and assist his mother; and after careful consideration of the idea of enlisting in the Guards, had suddenly recalled an incident of his youth, when, as a lad of nineteen, chaffed about his love for horses and stables, he had for a wager accurately fulfilled for a week the duties of coachman in a large establishment belonging to a friend of his father's.

"If all trades fail you can turn coachman, my lad," the master of the house had said to him jokingly; "and be sure you apply to me for a character."

In his extremity Gerald had acted seriously upon the jesting remark, and, actually applying to the gentleman, had obtained through his recommendation the situation of coachman to a wealthy manufacturer in the North, where his wages alone would almost equal the stipend he had received at the bank, to say nothing of his livery and the ordinary perquisites of the position.

"Blue with yellow facings," Gerald told his mother with a laugh. "Imagine me arrayed in such splendour. I am sure it will be awfully fetching."

The young man had not lost his knack of looking on the bright side of things, and in the presence of his mother could still laugh over his misfortune, but when he was alone he did give way sometimes.

It was a sunshiny evening in the earliest days of April, mild with the first breath of coming summer in the air. The lanes were starred with primroses, the birds were singing, and the Beechhaven garden was gay with crocus and wall-flowers. Gerald dearly loved the little home to which he had brought his mother full twelve years ago, and it went to his heart to leave it thus, and see his household gods brought to the hammer, and his pets, which were of small pecuniary value, distributed amongst his friends in the neighbourhood. Yet it was not his approaching departure, nor the thought of the annoyances and petty mortifications he could not fail to meet with in his new employment, which was weighing upon him now, and causing the weary despondent air pervading every line of his usually upright figure. He had had a hard day of it between interviews with his creditors and farewells to his friends; and when he reached the gate where Winifred used to wait for him on summer evenings, when he rode

home from Aylsmouth, he leant his arms upon it, feeling for the moment utterly dead beat. The months since his release from prison had been the most trying he had ever spent in his life ; for, added to his pecuniary embarrassments, he had endured terrible anxiety at hearing no news of Winifred. Only evil could have befallen her, he knew, or she would have written to acquaint them with her fate ; and the impossibility of tracing her, and dire forebodings of what she might be undergoing at the hands of her father, had driven him nearly distracted with misery and suspense. He had longed and prayed for tidings, yet when they came he would gladly have exchanged the certainty for the former silence. Winifred engaged to Sir Rawdon ! Either the girl's nature had completely changed during the year she had been absent from Beechhaven, or her letter only told a portion of the truth. The former alternative he would not accept for a moment, and he wrote Winifred a long letter of brotherly congratulation and affection, begging to be allowed to see her before her marriage. To this letter he had received no reply, as having been forced from the absence of address to enclose it to his uncle, needless to say, it had never reached Winifred's hands. He would not even then believe it was as his mother told him—that the girl had seized the first chance of escape from her uncongenial surroundings by accepting Sir Rawdon's offer ; he could not rid himself of the uneasy idea that there was something wrong. That short, constrained note sounded forced and unnatural compared to Winifred's old bright, affectionate letters. If he could only see with his own eyes that she was happy, he thought he could bear his own suffering as he had learned to bear it long ago.

Walking on to the house, he mentally pulled himself together as he entered the drawing-room, the only room yet free from the signs of the coming sale. Still, even here there

was a change ; for the flower vases were empty, there was no home-like litter of books and work, and Mrs. Daubeny's busy fingers hung idly at her side, as she lay with tired, troubled face awaiting her son's return.

"Well, little mother," he said with a smile, "I have arranged it all, and the ambulance cart is to come for you in the morning. It is the most comfortable thing I ever saw. I don't believe you will feel a bit of motion ; we could take you all over England in it if necessary."

Mrs. Daubeny brightened visibly as Gerald talked on with determined cheerfulness. Elliot brought in the tea, and he poured it out for his mother as usual, while both did their best to banish from their minds the bitter thought that it was all for the last time. The invalid bore up bravely until Gerald made some joking allusion to his future occupation, when, to his dismay, she suddenly burst into tears.

"My dear boy, I cannot bear it—I cannot," she sobbed, "that you should become a servant ; it is too humiliating."

"It seems the only thing I am good for. Where's the humiliation in working for one's bread ? Why, mother, you are not of Victor Hugo's opinion :

' Monseigneur, nous faisons un assemblage infâme,
J'ai l'habit d'un laquais et vous en avez l'âme.' "

"And to think it is all for that wretched girl," continued Mrs. Daubeny unheedingly. "I believe it is entirely her doing that Rawdon has behaved so abominably. Little ungrateful, good-for-nothing —"

"Stop, mother, I will not have the child abused," said Gerald firmly. "On my life, I do not believe she is to blame. It strikes me there is something very queer about the whole business. That first letter of Uncle Rawdon's was so uncommonly gracious and considerate ; and then his brusque note the next day, enclosing £5, and saying it was all he

could do for us. I suspect a plant, and as soon as I have landed you at Kew I shall run up to town, and try to get to the bottom of the mystery —”

He broke off, as Elliot entered with a card, which she handed to Gerald.

“A gentleman to see you, sir, on very important business.”

“Mr. Charles Vavasour! Who the dickens is he? I thought I had done with business for to-day. Well, show him into the smoking-room. I suppose there is still a chair to sit on;” and Gerald heaved a sigh, for he knew no stranger would be likely to visit Beechhaven Cottage at the present crisis with any but distasteful intentions.

“He asked for the mistress as well, sir,” said Elliot hesitatingly; and at this moment the door, which she had left ajar behind her, was pushed open and the stranger entered.

“Pray, pardon this intrusion,” he said with a frank courtesy, which at once prepossessed Gerald in his favour. “My business is urgent, and I trust not altogether disagreeable. I have come from town, where I had an interview this morning with your relative, Sir Rawdon Daubeny.”

“You have come from my uncle?” asked Gerald, his brows contracting a little as he offered his visitor a chair.

“No,” replied Mr. Vavasour as he seated himself, and keenly surveyed the two occupants of the room with his cold blue eyes. “I come on my own account, or, I should rather say, on my daughter’s. I think I must begin by putting to you, Mr. Daubeny, the same question I asked her this morning: Have you ever entertained any suspicion that the actor, James Flowers, was not the real father of your ward, Winifred?”

“I suspected it very strongly,” returned Gerald quickly, “but he proved the fact in Court.”

"Might I trouble you to look at that?" said Mr. Vavasour, handing him a folded paper.

Scarcely had the young man's eyes fallen on the contents than a flush suffused his face, and he started to his feet in wild excitement.

"Why, good Heavens! this is a certificate of the death of Flowers' child. Then Winifred is not his daughter, and he has no right to claim her!"

"None whatever. She is mine."

"Yours!" cried Gerald, gazing in incredulous amazement at the speaker. "How can you prove that?"

"Chiefly by the fact that Flowers has acknowledged my claim, and yielded the girl to my keeping."

"Then why, in Heaven's name," and Gerald's grey eyes flashed wrathfully under his knitted brows, "did you desert the child, and leave her to the mercy of a brute like Flowers?"

"It is a long story," said Mr. Vavasour deliberately; "but if you will allow me to tell it from the beginning, I hope I shall be able to give a sufficient answer to your question."

He paused, with his eyes on Gerald, until half-reluctantly the young man resumed his seat, when he continued quietly:

"To make the whole clear to you and Mrs. Daubeny, I must begin with a reference to your relative, Sir Rawdon. Twenty years ago, as you are probably aware, Sir Rawdon resided chiefly in Paris, where he had made the acquaintance of an artist, Monsieur René Souliard, and passed a good deal of his time in this gentleman's studio. M. Souliard had an only daughter, a mere child when Sir Rawdon first began to frequent the house; but as she grew older, he fell madly in love with her, and on her father's death, when Renée was sixteen, he proposed to marry her. She did not love him,

and refused his offer ; and as she was left almost penniless, and had no relations in France inclined to help her, she came to England to her mother's only brother, a doctor living in the East of London. The doctor himself was harmless enough, but he had married a coarse, vulgar woman, and had a large family of daughters, who all took after their mother. The poor child was miserable amongst them, and Sir Rawdon, finding out where she was living, took a house in Belgrave Square, got a female relative to play propriety, and was constantly inviting Renée, her aunt, and cousins to lunch or dinner, giving them boxes at the theatres, and sending his carriage to fetch and bring them home. Of course, for the honour and glory of the family, the aunt did all in her power to promote the match ; and I can't say what might have been the end of it, if Renée had not had the bad taste to fall in love with someone else."

Here the speaker's voice became a trifle conscious, and he went on more quickly :

" At a party one night to which she had been taken by her aunt, she met a young actor, who thought he had never in all his life seen anything so lovely and bewitching as Renée Souliard's face ; and he went home from the party as wildly in love as a young fellow could be. Of course he contrived opportunities for following up his acquaintance ; and at last he ventured to tell her of his love, and found, to his unspeakable joy, that it was returned. He came of a good family, but he was a pig-headed boy ; and having decided that his vocation in life was the stage, on the stage he went, and his noble family disowned him forthwith. He had some share of talent, and in the course of three or four years had risen to a fair position in his profession, and considered that his resources entirely justified him in taking a wife. Naturally the aunt did not regard matters from his point of view ; and the end of it was that he persuaded Renée to let him put up

their banns in the parish church, the last place to which the doctor's family ever resorted, and one morning they walked out and were quietly married. They were a couple of children, and were insanely happy together; only one cloud shadowed their horizon, the fact that Renée, without being a coquette, had been used to laugh and joke and receive attention from the men who frequented her father's studio, and did not see why she should not go on in the same way with her husband's brother actors, while he, unfortunately, was of a decidedly jealous temperament. She was innocence itself, poor child, and ought to have married a man capable of looking after her instead of a rash hot-headed boy. From the first he had been jealous of Sir Rawdon, for whom Renée naturally cherished a kindly remembrance, as he had been one of her oldest friends. You would have thought she could not give a more decided proof of the state of her feelings than by marrying the actor instead of the baronet; but the young fellow's jealousy once excited, he was always brooding over the idea, and torturing his wife's innocent remarks into hints that she regretted her decision, and would have preferred Sir Rawdon. She discovered his delusion at last, and laughed him out of it for a time; but as Fate would have it, she took a fancy one day to an old inn at which they stopped for lunch, and expressed a wish that her child might be born there. He cared for nothing but to please her; so when the time came, he managed to get free of engagements, and took her to the inn. It was 'The Duke's Head' Inn on Chesney Common, near Kenningborough; and neither the actor nor his wife had the least idea that Sir Rawdon's place, Lynsccombe Towers, was situated within a few miles of it. When the actor found this out it brought back his suspicions in full force; for he thought his wife had been cognizant of the fact, and had contrived it purposely to meet her old lover. He could not broach the matter in her critical condition, and

holding his tongue and brooding over it seemed to double its significance.

"At last, about a month after the child's birth, he laid a plan for testing the truth of his surmise. He told her he was going into Kenningborough to dine with a friend, and should not return before midnight. He drove into the town, and sent the pony carriage back, as he intended to walk home. Just before he reached Kenningborough, Sir Rawdon's carriage passed him with the baronet inside; but he did not recall this fact until afterwards, and it never struck him that, seeing him in the pony trap from 'The Duke's Head,' his rival might easily have stopped his carriage at the inn, and learned from the loquacious landlady that Renée was there and her husband not expected home before midnight. The actor purposely timed his return to reach the inn by eleven o'clock. He crossed the garden to the French window of his wife's sitting-room, and saw in a moment that she was not alone. Sir Rawdon was beside her in the room, bending over her with what seemed a lover-like attitude.

"'Do go,' he heard her say, 'or Charlie will be coming home, and he has such *bête* notions. He is actually jealous of you.'

"She laughed, and he echoed the laugh; and it maddened the boy, for he thought they were amusing themselves at his credulity.

"He sprang into the room, uttering the first furious words of passion that rose to his lips. Renée looked frightened, and tried to speak, laying her hand on his arm; but he flung her off, and turned furiously on Sir Rawdon, accusing him of robbing him of his wife. You can fancy the contemptuous sneer with which Sir Rawdon answered, and, wild with rage, the boy-husband rushed towards him with lifted hand, when Renée threw herself between.

"'You shall not fight, you shall not!' she cried. 'Charlie, you are mad,—Sir Rawdon has done you no harm.'

"And he—God help him!—took the words to imply her love and concern for his rival. Up till that moment, in spite of appearances, he had never really believed in her guilt; but now, in that one black instant, rage died out of him, and his heart grew cold as stone. Even then he loved her too well to wish to injure her or the man he thought she loved.

"'For your sake,' he said, 'I will not touch him, but from this moment I have neither wife nor child. Farewell, Renée; you will never see me again.'

"He caught up a desk which contained his papers from the table, and stepped out again into the night. He heard a cry from his wife, but she did not follow him, though he walked very slowly across the garden. Fool that he was, not to guess that Sir Rawdon would have effectually prevented her from coming after her husband. He walked on without knowing where he was going, and in the morning found himself near a station, from which he took the first train for London. He went to the Docks, and got on board a vessel bound for Melbourne, resolved to leave England for ever. You are acquainted, I suppose, with the details of the tragedy at the inn? The actor knew nothing of it until, several months afterwards, the story was told in his presence by a man who never dreamed of his connection with it, and added the gratuitous information that the baby had died with its mother."

Gerald's eyes had been fixed with the keenest interest on the speaker's face, and he now asked quickly:

"Was not Vavasour, the name of the lady who was found dead at the inn? Have you been telling us your own story?"

"I have," answered his visitor with a heavy sigh. "God forgive me for a jealous fool! My poor little Renée, I would stake my soul now on her innocence."

"And she was Winifred's mother?" exclaimed Mrs. Daubeny. "Then the landlady was right after all."

"Yes, it was good Mrs. Rudd who put me on the right scent. How Renée came by her death is a mystery to me. I cannot think Sir Rawdon would have struck her down. It is more probable that she fainted, and fell against the clock, but I shall never forgive myself for my senseless folly in leaving her at his mercy."

"Then how did Flowers come to adopt Winifred?" asked Gerald, whose thoughts were naturally more concerned with the child than the mother.

"He was an actor in the company to which I belonged. I never liked the man, although he was very far from being the drunken brute he seems now to have become. He had been lately married to a very pretty girl, decidedly his superior in refinement, gentle and yielding, without any will of her own. It was said she was an orphan whom Flowers had pestered with his attentions until she had married him for the sake of peace. Renée took a great fancy to her, and they became close friends. Mrs. Flowers' baby was born a month before Renée's, and she used to write the most absurdly high-flown letters to my wife about it. She hadn't a grain of common sense, poor girl. The first letter from Mrs. Flowers which I ventured to give Renée after her confinement was dated from Brighton, telling of the death of her child, and she seemed almost crazy with grief. I have since learned from Flowers that he allowed his wife to adopt her friend's child, thinking that I should return and pay him for looking after it, or that if the girl turned out a decent actress it would be worth his while to be thought her real father. Giles Harvey was Flowers' theatrical name, by which he was usually known at that time. I also passed chiefly under my theatrical name, which prevented my friends from identifying me with the fugitive from 'The Duke's Head' Inn. For the sake of the child, we had given our real name at the inn."

"And how did you discover that your daughter was living, and had been adopted by Flowers?"

"From reading the account of the trial in the English papers, and the description of the missing girl. I remembered that Flowers' own child had died; and I also remembered Renée telling me that she and Amy Flowers had made a compact that if anything happened to either, the survivor should adopt the other's child. Of course my feelings had modified in course of time, and I was more than half inclined to believe I might have wronged my poor little girl. Some years ago I married again; and after worrying myself over the account of the trial, and the description which reminded me so much of Renée, I made a clean breast of it to my wife, whom I had merely acquainted with the fact of my former marriage, leading her to believe that my first wife had died when her child was born. My present wife is a fine woman, and she grasped the situation immediately, told me she was sure it was all my jealous folly, that Renée was innocent, and that if this girl were really her child, I had behaved disgracefully in the affair. My wife never minces matters, and I was quite prepared to own that I had, if her view of the case were correct.

"It was impossible for me to get away last autumn; but as soon as Christmas was over, I took the first boat home. I went straight to 'The Duke's Head,' heard from the landlady, who recognised me at once, that a Mrs. Harvey had taken the baby, and was further informed that the child Winifred Flowers, whom you, Mr. Daubeny, had once brought to the inn, exactly resembled my poor Renée. I went up to town, interviewed your solicitors, telling them who I was, and learned the particulars of the hiding-place you had found for Winifred in France, and of the manner in which she had given herself up. I went to Flowers' solicitors, but they refused to give me their client's address. I employed detectives

to trace him, but he was living under an assumed name, and their efforts were fruitless. At last I saw in the papers the announcement of Winifred's approaching marriage with Sir Rawdon. Of course that gave me the clue. I set the detectives on Sir Rawdon, and soon heard that he was visiting every day an old house in the northern suburbs of London, where a man resided who answered to my description of Flowers. I waited until they had seen Sir Rawdon into the house, and then, leaving my men outside, with orders to send for the police if I was more than half-an-hour in rejoining them, I got admitted with some difficulty to Flowers' room. He knew me, and knocked under in a moment at the sight of the Brighton certificate, and my threat of prosecuting him for perjury. I made him take me upstairs to a sitting-room where there was a woman like a stone griffin mounting guard by the door, and Sir Rawdon standing near a girl who might have been Renée's very self if she had not looked so ill——"

"So ill!" interrupted Gerald in alarm.

"Yes; she has had a bad time of it, I fear. If I had known then what she has told me since, I should have had those scoundrels arrested, regardless of consequences to myself. I did not want to drag the whole story of my married life before the public if I could help it, and Sir Rawdon seemed only too willing to agree to a tacit compromise. I ought to have been sharp enough to suspect something from his readiness, but I really should never have given him credit for the blackguardly part he has played. If you had surrendered her last summer, Mr. Daubeny, I can tell you this, she would never have been alive now."

"What do you mean?" asked Gerald sternly. "What has Sir Rawdon had to do with it?"

"Everything. It seems his old passion for Renée revived for Renée's daughter. He saw the girl here last year, and had some private conversation with her——"

"Yes, when they were walking home from Dering," put in Mrs. Daubeny eagerly.

"Exactly. In this conversation he contrived to ascertain that Renée—Winifred, I mean—was perfectly happy here, and by dint of consulting her on his matrimonial chances, drew from her the reply that she thought a woman would as soon jump over the cliffs as become his third wife. He saw he had no hope with her here, and therefore hunted up Flowers, and offered him a considerable sum to claim his daughter, and hand her over to him."

"Impossible!" cried Gerald, springing to his feet. "What proof have you, Mr. Vavasour, of these monstrous charges you bring against my uncle?"

"My daughter's word, also Sir Rawdon's language and behaviour in my presence this morning; but if you wish it, Mr. Daubeny, I have no doubt I can produce Flowers to tell you the story with his own lips. He is in mortal dread of me so long as I hold this certificate over his head."

"I can believe anything against Sir Rawdon, anything," said Mrs. Daubeny with decision. "I remember now the odd way he kept looking at the child that evening he was here."

"But where is Winifred, and what does she say?" exclaimed Gerald impatiently. "Is she really safe?"

"Quite safe, I trust. I have left her at 'The Bull' Hotel, in Aylsmouth, while I came here, at her desire, to tell you the whole story of her life since she gave herself up."

"Then please tell it to us," said Mrs. Daubeny eagerly. "Sit down, Gerald; and, my dear boy, don't look so fierce. Let us hear what Mr. Vavasour has to say. Where has she been all this time? Her note told us nothing."

"She was taken straight off by Flowers in a cab to this house in North London where I found her, of which she had only once crossed the threshold until she left it this morning with me."

"Do you mean he locked her up?" cried Mrs. Daubeny, in amazement. "Why didn't she run away?"

"She had no chance. She was put under the charge of this griffin woman, who, it seems, had been matron in a charity school at Killingworth, and being renowned as a severe disciplinarian, had been engaged by Sir Rawdon to break Winifred in, and make her life so wretched that she should be delighted to accept his offer, when he made it, as a chance of release. She was also kept studying for the stage by Flowers. This went on for a month, when Sir Rawdon appeared in the house, and pretended he had traced her there, and tried to effect her release. I can't go now into all the details of the plot, they are simply revolting; but the girl was a match for them. She refused, under any circumstances, to marry Sir Rawdon, and he departed, having in her hearing promised Flowers £500 on the wedding-day if Winifred should change her mind and take him. On the plea of making her change her mind, Flowers and the griffin led her such a life between them, that I believe another month of it would have killed her outright. One day, however, Flowers let out the whole plot to her when he was drunk, and the next time she saw Sir Rawdon she taxed him with it to his face. He could not deny it, excusing himself on the plea of his love for her, and swearing he would keep her imprisoned until she consented to become his wife. You probably know enough of Winifred to guess what answer she gave him. She is made of fine stuff. It did my heart good to see the way Sir Rawdon cowered before her this morning. I should think she must be the first person who ever succeeded in making him feel ashamed of himself. However, he had another card to play. He showed her a letter, Mrs. Daubeny, which he had received from you, upon the state of your affairs, and he told Winifred that unless she agreed to marry him he should refuse to give you any assistance."

"Scoundrel!" said Gerald between his teeth, springing again to his feet in burning wrath and indignation, while tears began to gather in his mother's eyes.

"She could not stand by and see you ruined, so she consented to his terms on condition that he paid all Mr. Daubeny's debts, and made him a future allowance of £1000 a year. She insisted that he should write to Mrs. Daubeny at once, and let her go herself to the post with the letter. Since then, he has assured her that he was making all inquiries, and would pay the money as soon as he heard the full amount required. This morning when he found the game was up, he shamelessly avowed that he never meant to help you, and would have deceived her to the end."

"And this is true?" said Gerald, standing in front of his visitor, with his brows drawn together and a terrible light of anger in his eyes.

"True as I live."

"Then God may forgive my uncle, but I never will!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

Gerald Vows Vengeance.

 TTERLY wearied out by her journey and the excitement of the day, Winifred was lying on a sofa in the best parlour at "The Bull," nervously starting at every sound in the house, and very timid at being left alone, although it had been by her own desire, as she dared not present herself at Beech-haven without being first sure of her welcome.

"I know they must be angry with me," she had said piteously to her father, "and I will never go back to the house unless they quite forgive me. I could not bear mother to be cold, and Gerald to meet me with the stern look in his eyes. It always frightens me, and I could not bear it now."

And the thought of Gerald's possible anger was absorbing her mind to the exclusion of every other. He must have been vexed with her for giving herself up. Mrs. Daubeny's silence on the subject in her letter was sufficiently significant; and she also feared that in his unsparing contempt for weakness, he would blame her for having yielded to Sir Rawdon, even though it had been to win help for his necessity. She was too weakened and unnerved by all she had gone through to be able to look on the sunny side of things, although her father had done his best to cheer her. He had told her the story of his Australian life, of the stage triumphs he had secured, and of the success of the investments in which he had placed his earnings, leading him, in course of time, to renounce the stage and take altogether to business. How

Fortune had favoured him, and he was now a wealthy man, able and anxious to indulge any wish his daughter might express.

"Of course, I feel the Daubenys have laid me under an obligation which I can never discharge," he had said to her. "Your friend Gerald must be a splendid fellow. He can't well object to my setting him straight, and to my giving him a fair start again in business, as he has got into this mess entirely on your account; but I shouldn't like to insult him by offering payment for your maintenance and education. You belong to them far more than to me, and if Mrs. Daubeny wants to keep you she shall, though my wife made me promise to bring you back to her; and I know you would like her and the children."

And the girl had listened with eager interest to his account of her young step-brothers and sisters, although unable to divest herself entirely of the curious feeling which had been upon her all day that she was in a dream, from which she would presently awake to find herself back, at the mercy of her tormentors, in her dreary London prison.

More than two hours had gone by since her father left her, and unable to remain quiet any longer under the suspense of waiting, she rose from the sofa and paced restlessly up and down the room. It was the same room, she remembered, to which Gerald had brought her when he carried her off from the caravans, eight and a half years ago. She could recall every incident of the scene. How he had laid her on the sofa while he wrote a hurried note of excuse to the friends with whom he was to dine; and then, when the cart was ready, how tenderly he had wrapped her in a shawl he had borrowed from the landlady, and lifted her in his arms, soothing her timidity with the first words of compassion and kindness she had heard since her mother's death. How good he had been to her then, and how fervently the girl wished

herself again a little child that she might be sure of awakening his tenderness and pity.

"If he is angry with me, I shall die, I know I shall," she said to herself. "I cannot bear any more to-day."

Just as the light was beginning to fade in the room, she heard a footstep which she recognised in a moment springing up the stairs, and, overwhelmed with nervous terror, she shrank back, supporting herself by the wall, as with a quick, sharp knock at the door Gerald opened it and came forward into the room. His face was alight with eager joy, but as his eyes fell on Winifred's drooping figure an instantaneous change passed over his countenance. Horror, pity, love, indignation, anger, seemed struggling for predominance in his expression as he came straight towards her, and caught both her hands in his.

"Why, my poor little girl, what have those brutes been doing to you? Child, look up. You are not afraid of me, Mignonette?"

"I was so afraid you would be angry with me," she murmured in a faltering voice, biting her lips to keep back the tears which started to her eyes at the old protecting tenderness of his tone and manner.

"*Angry?*" he repeated, in a tone which laid all her fears to rest. "Angry with you, my poor little crushed snowdrop? If I could but pay those scoundrels out for all they must have made you suffer!"

"It is all over now," she said, with a smile almost pathetic in its contrast to her white, worn face and sunken, dark-rimmed eyes. "I don't mind anything if you and mother are not vexed with me. What did you think of me when you got my letter?"

Her glance fell, and a faint flush tinted the pure transparency of her cheeks.

"I was sure there was something wrong," he said. "I

knew you too well, little one, to believe you had fallen in love with the Daubeny diamonds; but the mother turned crusty, I must admit, especially when you sent no answer to my letter, which I suppose was never allowed to reach you?"

"No; did you write to me? How good of you, Gerald! Sir Rawdon gave me nothing but mother's note, and that did make me unhappy, though I could not really have expected her to write differently. Is she vexed with me still?"

Winifred's tone began to falter again, and she glanced up at her companion with just the old timid, wistful look of her childhood.

"Of course she isn't. Mignonette, what do you think we are made of? I left my mother crying over what Mr. Vavasour told us about you, and I fancy she will cry still more when she sees you. It maddens me to think what you must have had to go through with those cold-blooded wretches, to make you look like this."

"Enough to make me more than ever grateful to you for not sending me to Killingworth, where I should have enjoyed Mrs. Monk's tender mercies for seven years instead of five months;" and she added, with a quick catch of her breath: "Gerald, how brave and dear it was of you to refuse to give me up. I never dreamed—you know I never dreamed—that they could punish you for it—that you would go to prison for me. I don't know how to thank you. I can't do it at all," and her eyes sought his with a very passion of gratitude; "but you saved my life again by it. I must have died if I had stayed five months longer at Willow Lodge. Were you really not angry with me for giving myself up?"

"Of course I was awfully cut up as to what might have become of you; but when will you learn to have faith in me, little one? Did you think I should not know just how you felt about it, and that you forced yourself, for our sakes, to do a thing that was harder for you than death? I don't fancy

Villiers will ever forgive me the wigging I gave him when I found out how he had treated you. To have scolded you like a naughty child for your splendid pluck and heroism! I declare I could have knocked him down when he told me what he said to you, and how you fainted in Court."

"It was foolish of me," she said apologetically, "and I fainted this morning too. I don't know what has come to me; but I am sorry you were angry with poor Mr. Villiers, because he did it all out of friendship for you. Only it was rather hard to be told just then that I was ungrateful to you, and deserved to be locked up on bread and water. I used to think sometimes," she went on, with a little smile, "that it was a pity, for Mr. Villiers' private satisfaction, he could not know how entirely my father—I mean Mr. Flowers—agreed with him in that opinion. You must take me to make my peace with Mr. Villiers some day, Gerald."

"I won't promise," he answered. "I don't think he is worthy of the honour. And now, Mignonette, are you ready to come home with me? and do you think you can stand the jolting of the cart, or shall I get you a fly?"

An eager flush dyed the girl's pale cheeks, and her eyes brightened.

"Am I really to come home? How good of mother! I think the very sight of the dear cart will make me quite well, and it never jolts a bit. How can you libel it, Gerald?" and a flicker, just a flicker, of the old mirthful, mischievous smile flashed over her face, and fairly brought the tears to Gerald's eyes by the comparison it suggested between the thin, frail form and wasted features stamped so legibly with their tale of pain and suffering, and the bright, happy girl, full of buoyant life and energy, who had laughed like a sunbeam through his home only one short year ago.

To hide his emotion, he turned to ring the bell, ordered the luggage to be put on the cart, and asked for the bill,

which Mr. Vavasour had commissioned him to pay ; and by the time he had settled it, Winifred returned, dressed for departure.

"Do you remember ?" she said, lingering for a moment on the threshold. "It was from this room you took me home for the first time to the Cottage. I think it is a good omen that they should have given it to my father to-day. I wonder if it is possible to be as happy again as I was all those years at Beechhaven ? I never realised, until it was at an end what you had done for me in giving me such a home. Oh, Gerald ! I do hope the spell is broken, and I shall bring you no more ill luck. Are you sure you want me back again, after all ?"

"Not want our sunbeam back !" he answered energetically. "Why, child, do you think we are bats, to love gloom and darkness ? Pray Heaven, our troubles are over ; but let the worst come, little one, we can worry through, so long as we have you safe and well."

And hand in hand, as they had left the travelling theatre, the two went down the dimly-lighted staircase to the street, where the house-roofs stood out against the sunset glory, and Winifred almost fancied the intervening years had been a dream, and that she was again a little child, yielding herself in perfect trust and happiness to the care of one who had been to her as God's angel sent from heaven.

She did not talk much on the drive. Having asked after her friends and the safety of the pets, she relapsed into a silence of restful peace, content to know that she was at Gerald's side, driving homewards through the soft, tender gloaming of the April evening ; and Gerald himself seemed little disposed for speech. His first rapturous joy at Winifred's return, and Mr. Vavasour's offer of relief from his embarrassments, had been effectually damped by the girl's changed appearance and racking cough ; and a terrible fear

was gnawing at his heart that perhaps, after all, he was only bringing her home to die. The evening light was slow to fade, and a young moon shone in the western sky, so that the familiar landmarks were distinctly visible, and Winifred roused herself as they drove along the Beechhaven lane.

"Are the primroses out still?" she said. "They were fading last year when I went away. I can hardly believe it was only a year ago. I feel at least ten years older. Ah! there is the gate where I used to wait for you, Gerald; and you don't go to the bank any longer? How strange it all seems!"

The hall door flew open as they approached the house; for Elliot, having relieved her excited feelings by a good cry over the wonderful news that the strange gentleman was Miss Winifred's real father, and was going to settle all Mr. Daubeny's affairs, so that they need not leave the Cottage, had fairly surpassed herself in bustle and energy. She had sent off Tomlins post-haste to the village to procure some additions to the dinner, and to request the assistance of Charlotte, now the wife of Mr. Graham's coachman, who was always ready on an emergency to leave her husband and children to a neighbour's care, and repair to Beechhaven Cottage. In the previous autumn, Charlotte's successor had been dismissed for the sake of economy, and Elliot had undertaken single-handed the whole work of the house. She was now beaming with joy at the good news, and at the return of Winifred, to whom she was strongly attached; and when the dogcart drew up before the door, the whole force of the establishment—Elliot, Charlotte, Tomlins, Grim, two cats, a fox terrier, and a young collie Gerald had given as a puppy to Winifred—were gathered to receive her.

"Wait for me to lift you down," said Gerald, who had noticed how languidly the girl had mounted to the high seat; and coming round he took her in his arms and placed her

in the midst of the excited group under the full lamplight in the hall.

"Why, Miss Winifred!" cried Elliot in dismay. "Whatever has come to you, my dear? You have been ill, for sure."

"Eh! but she do look bad," murmured the sympathising Charlotte, as Winifred kissed the old servant, and then held out her hand to Charlotte and Tomlins, while the dogs leaped round her in wild delight, and the collie, standing on his hind legs, tried to lick his mistress's pale face.

"No, I have not been ill," she said, with a little quiver in her voice; "but, oh! I am so glad to be at home again, Elliot."

Perceiving she was slightly overwhelmed by the dogs' attentions and the servants' remarks, Gerald drew her hand through his arm and led her into the drawing-room, where her father was standing in the centre of the hearthrug, and Mrs. Daubeny lay with eager eyes fixed upon the door.

"Here she is, mother," he said, approaching the couch, although the girl hung back a little, half trembling, in spite of Gerald's assurances as to the certainty of her welcome.

"My darling child," said Mrs. Daubeny tenderly, her sweet face alight with love and pity as she held out her arms to Winifred, who quitted Gerald's side in a moment, and kneeling by the couch, found herself drawn into the close, loving embrace of her adopted mother.

And all the girl's long pent-up suffering, love and loneliness found vent in one yearning cry of "Mother, mother!" while she burst into a very passion of weeping, the first tears which had come to her relief for many a long day.

The two men exchanged glances, and quietly left the room.

"They are best alone," said Mr. Vavasour. "Women can be uncommonly hard, but they always understand one

another in that sort of case. I don't know why the child should cry, do you? but it is bound to do her good in the end, though I prefer not to watch the process. If you can spare half-an-hour, Mr. Daubeny, we might plunge into business."

"Winifred looks very ill," said Gerald anxiously, leading the way into the smoking-room, where he lighted a lamp, and with difficulty produced two chairs from the chaos of distracted furniture. "I suppose you did not think of taking her to see a doctor in town?"

"I did think of it, but I satisfied myself that what she needed most was mothering and happiness, poor child, so I decided to lose no time in bringing her to Beechhaven. If she does not pick up in a day or two, I will have someone down to see her; but I fancy it is the same with her as it was with her mother, and that her spirits will carry her more than half-way towards recovery. Renée used to have just such a cough with the damp of our English winters, but it always left her in the spring."

When, some time later, Gerald returned to the drawing-room, he began to think that possibly Mr. Vavasour might be in the right. Winifred's tears were all dried, and she was talking brightly, seated on her stool by the couch, with her head on Mrs. Daubeny's shoulder, while the invalid's hand was stroking with caressing fingers the soft, dark hair. There was a happy, restful look on the girl's face, a little flush had relieved the transparent pallor of her complexion, and her eyes already looked less pitiful and sunken.

"Don't move, dear child, it is only Gerald," said Mrs. Daubeny, as Winifred gave a nervous start on hearing the opening of the door. "My boy, it is frightful, frightful, what this poor child has been through. How can we ever make up to her for the way those wretches treated her? I wish you would horsewhip Rawdon; it would be some

slight relief to my feelings, though I should like to see him hanged."

Gerald did not speak, but his eyes gleamed, and Winifred almost trembled at the look upon his face.

"Don't go near Sir Rawdon, Gerald," she said fearfully. "He hates you, he told me he did. I believe he would kill you if he could."

"He would not dare," said Mrs. Daubeny hotly. "If I were Mr. Vavasour, I should have him up, whatever happened; but if he won't, Gerald, you must do something. It is disgraceful he should be allowed to escape. Show Gerald your arm, Winifred. Nonsense, child, you don't mind his seeing it. Look here!" and she pushed back the sleeve, revealing the girl's wasted arm, the weals and bruises still plainly visible upon the soft skin.

The colour rushed into Winifred's face, and she covered it hastily, the moment she was released by Mrs. Daubeny.

"Never mind," she murmured; "it was worth going through everything for the sake of coming home again. Mother, you don't know how happy I am;" and with a sigh of intense satisfaction, she nestled again into Mrs. Daubeny's arms.

And all this time Gerald said nothing, but even his mother began to be slightly alarmed at his expression, and to wish she had not taken such pains to rouse his indignation. She did not guess that Gerald's whole strength and energy had been already concentrated in a secret vow of vengeance, and that he needed no spur in his burning desire to avenge Winifred's wrongs upon her persecutor.

"You need not fear, mother," he said at last, when he dared to trust his voice. "My uncle shall answer to me for his behaviour; and for my little Mignonette, if our love and care can make her forget the past, and bring back the roses to her cheeks, she shall not be troubled long by the remembrance of Sir Rawdon's love tokens."

He spoke very quietly, as Gerald always spoke when he was most deeply moved, but every inflection of his voice was familiar to Winifred's ears, and she looked up in undisguised alarm.

"Gerald, don't, pray, go near Sir Rawdon. I am sure he will be too strong for you. I really do believe there is something about him that is not quite human, like the people in old times possessed by evil spirits. Indeed, I shall be quite well now that I have come home, unless you frighten me by running into danger. Oh! please, please, don't go near him. Mother, tell him he is not to do it."

"I promise you I will run no unnecessary risk," said Gerald, looking down at the anxious, eager face; "but, little one, this is a case in which I must act for myself. You will trust me to do what I think right in the matter?"

He smiled into her pleading eyes, and in spite of the tenor of his reply, the girl felt more satisfied. Gerald was so strong and brave, her *beau-ideal* of manly courage and chivalry, she did not really believe it possible that Sir Rawdon could do anything to injure him. She determined, however, to try and allay his indignation by every means in her power, and did her best to conceal her weariness and languor, insisting on appearing at dinner, and making a brave attempt to eat, although it was almost a fortnight since she had taken any solid food. She could not keep her eyes open, however, in the drawing-room afterwards; her spasmodic attempts at conversation ceased entirely, and she fell fast asleep by the couch, with her head resting on Mrs. Daubeny's shoulder. She was sleeping so soundly that she never moved when the two men came into the room; and they both stood looking down at her in silence, an expression of evident sadness in Mr. Vavasour's light-blue eyes, while Gerald's colour rose, his nostrils dilated, he breathed quick and hard, and his gaze as it rested on the girl's white, thin face, with

its unmistakable traces of past suffering and privation, would have effectually betrayed his secret to his mother, had she not guessed it long before.

"Call Elliot to take the child to bed," said Mrs. Daubeny softly. "She is completely tired out."

"Let me carry her up;" and so gently that Winifred never even stirred, Gerald stooped and lifted the little frail form in his arms. "There is nothing of her at all," he said, with a sigh that was almost a sob. "She is hardly any heavier than the first day I took her from the caravans. Will she ever be really strong again, mother?"

"Oh! yes, in time," answered Mrs. Daubeny cheerfully. "She is such a good child to do all she is told; you will see how much better she will look before the week is over."

But Gerald's heart was very heavy as he turned to leave the room, and Mr. Vavasour, who stepped forward to open the door, was not surprised to catch a muttered imprecation on Sir Rawdon from his lips, nor to see a look in the young man's eyes as if he would have liked to strangle somebody. The girl's weary eyelids lifted as Gerald laid her on the bed in her own pretty room, which by his orders had been left the last in the house to be dismantled, and she glanced with a smile from his face to Elliot, who had followed them up the stairs.

"Did I go to sleep in the drawing-room? How good of you to carry me up, Gerald. Good-night, and kiss mother for me. Oh! I shall sleep well to-night."

"Good-night, little one," he answered tenderly; but instead of returning to the drawing-room he went out into the garden, where he walked hurriedly up and down before the house until long after the light in Winifred's room was extinguished, and Elliot had left the tired girl to undisturbed repose.

CHAPTER XXIV.

To Win or Lose?



RS. DAUBENY'S prophecy was fulfilled, and Winifred, with her youth and elastic temperament, revived like a drooping daisy in a summer shower. Her cough left her, and little by little her health and strength returned. Only one cloud obscured the blue sky of her perfect happiness, and even that was dispelled when, after suffering terrible anxiety during a visit Gerald paid to London, he returned to tell her that Sir Rawdon had again betaken himself to his yacht, and sailed off, bound no one knew whither. Forced thus to postpone his intended vengeance, Gerald's thoughts were free to turn to pleasanter matters. Thanks to Mr. Vavasour his embarrassments were at an end, and he was promised some suitable employment for the future; although Mr. Vavasour, with his keen love for business as business, began to shake his head over the young man's capabilities.

"He is clear-headed and methodical, which goes a long way," he said one day to Mrs. Daubeny, "but it is easy to see he hates the very sight of figures. He will never make his fortune in business, it goes too much against the grain. He ought to be a soldier, or a country gentleman. It is a thousand pities his uncle has taken such a dislike to him. As the estates are entailed, he is sure to marry now, out of sheer spite to Gerald."

By the Daubenys' warm invitation, Mr. Vavasour stayed on for the present at Beechhaven Cottage. There was something frank and straightforward about him which won upon them all; and finding that he fully appreciated her friends,

Winifred was not long in becoming sincerely attached to him herself, although she was rather daunted at first by his cold, grave manner, and secretly drew comparisons between him and Gerald by no means to the advantage of her father. Entirely undemonstrative, he was yet evidently fond of his daughter, especially when, with her returning health and spirits, she seemed to remind him in every word and look of her dead mother.

And now that his future was once more in his own hands, and no dictates of honour and prudence compelled Gerald to keep silence on the subject of his love, he shrank with curious hesitation from putting his fate to the proof. He could not believe that Winifred cared for him other than as a brother : she was perfectly simple and natural in her behaviour, but there was a change, and he felt it. Their relations to each other were altered ; the old confidential, fraternal intercourse was no longer possible to either, and Winifred, as the woman, was the first to grasp the situation, and manifest a reserve which grew, as time went on, into almost shunning Gerald's society. The troubles of the past year had not flown lightly over the young man's head, and he felt himself at thirty too old and grave to win the love of a girl not yet eighteen ; but the chief reason for his hesitation lay in the fact that if Winifred entertained for him merely a sisterly affection, the rejection of his proposal must, of necessity, banish her from Beechhaven, and he was well aware that she shrank from the thought of seeking a new home and friends on the other side of the world. Dread, lest he should be the cause of her exile, sealed his lips, and brave and determined as he showed himself in all other matters, he could not summon sufficient courage to risk the loss of the happiness he found in Winifred's presence by a step which might bring him the greatest joy that life could offer, or plunge him back into the furnace of affliction from which he had so lately emerged.

Winifred's intercourse with the family at the Vicarage was naturally resumed, although she carefully concealed from them Sir Rawdon's share in her troubles. Nellie was delighted to have her friend again, and poured into Winifred's astonished ears the whole history of her triumphs and conquests throughout the year. Philip and Ernest, when they came home for Easter, made much of her as before in their rough, boyish fashion, without seeming to perceive any change in their old playfellow; but when, about a month after her return to Beechhaven, Theodore Graham made his appearance, on leave of absence from Paris, Winifred found it was no longer a case of fun and chaff, but that the young man was paying her most unmistakable attentions. On some pretence, he was always walking over, alone or with his sister, to the Cottage, and took every opportunity of seeking the girl's society. He thought Winifred had become prettier than ever, with her delicate, transparent face and the beautiful eyes, which still bore, when in repose, the haunting shadow of the dreary months she had passed through at Willow Lodge.

One warm, sunshiny afternoon, when Mr. Vavasour had driven into Aylsmouth, Gerald asked Winifred to come out for a walk with him and the dogs; but the girl, who seldom now committed herself to a *tête-à-tête* with Gerald, refused on the plea of wishing to make a sketch in the bay, and, some time later, he set out alone. He had not gone far before he met Mr. Theodore Graham, arrayed in a startling tweed suit of the most fashionable cut, with a new hat and very new pair of gloves, in which he had apparently only just encased his hands, for he was fastening the last button as he came along.

"Hullo, Daubeny!" he said, approaching with the bland smile and profound air of self-satisfaction which invariably characterised the young man's demeanour. "You are the very fellow I wanted to see. Has Mr. Vavasour said anything to you about me?"

"Not a word. Hi, Ruff ! to heel, good dog."

"Well, I met him this morning, and thought I would have the thing out; and he wasn't half bad—said he shouldn't attempt to interfere with his daughter's inclinations, as he considered she belonged far more to you than to him, and that I was at perfect liberty to win her if I could. What's the matter ?"

"It's that confounded puppy putting up a pheasant," said Gerald, making a spring up the bank; and his companion had to wait until the delinquent collie was recalled, chastised, and once more ordered in to heel, when he continued eagerly :

"Of course, it is true what the old chap says. Winifred cares more for your opinion than for anyone else's in the world ; and she is such a girl for making fun of a fellow, I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind saying a good word for me—giving me a character, in fact."

"I don't think my opinion in such a matter would have the slightest weight," said Gerald quietly. "Ask her yourself, Theo ; she won't make fun if she sees you are in earnest, I am very sure."

"I would rather you stood sponsor for me. However, I daresay you are right. I think she ought to have me ; we have always been friends, and there is no one else at present. But you will let me tell her that you approve, Daubeny ; she will think a lot of that ?"

"You may tell her I approve of anything that will be for her real happiness," said Gerald steadily.

"And is she at home now ? Can I see her at once ?"

"Yes ; you will find her down on the rocks. Good-bye for the present ; the dogs are rather wild at first starting ;" and with hurried uneven steps, Gerald continued on his way.

This, then, was the end of his procrastination, a younger, more resolute rival was wooing Winifred under his very eyes.

How he cursed his folly in not having foreseen such a development. Could the child care for this good-looking, conceited noodle? To be sure, they were old playfellows, and Theodore seemed so confident of success. "No one else," he had said. It was then solely in a fraternal relationship that Gerald was considered to stand to Winifred, or possibly even in a paternal! A bitter smile curved Mr. Daubeny's lips, and he involuntarily quickened his steps, as though by physical exertion he could deaden the tortures of suspense consuming him. He was charged with a message from Mrs. Daubeny to a distant farm; and having accomplished his errand, walked back at the same swift pace. His mother was alone in the drawing-room at the Cottage with Elliot making her tea, and he soon ascertained that she had seen nothing of Theodore Graham, and was wondering why Winifred did not return to tea.

"Do go and call her, Gerald," she said. "She never has any idea of time when she is painting;" but on one pretext or another, Gerald postponed the ungrateful task, expecting every moment to see the two young people come up the walk together; the two lovers he might have termed them, for he drew the worst possible augury from Winifred's tardy appearance.

At last, when, without owning the truth which he had no mind to do, he could not any longer oppose Mrs. Daubeny's wishes, he started for the shore. The evening was of summer warmth and brilliancy; the garden was gay with flowers, and the tender green of the newly opened beech-leaves waved against the blue of the unclouded sky. The bay stretched like a sheet of sapphire under the guardian cliffs, the tiny waves breaking in pearly foam over the smooth white sand. Very slowly, and without the faintest consciousness of the beauty of the May evening, Gerald descended the path through the wood, and emerged upon the shore. What had become of the two he sought. Had the sea swallowed them?

for not a living creature appeared in sight. Standing in uncertainty by the margin of the waves, he heard a sound that was curiously like a sob, and skirting the base of a great rock from which it proceeded, he found, to his amazement, Winifred lying face downwards on the sand, crying as if her heart would break.

In a moment he was by her side, bending over her with the tenderness which the sight of her tears had always roused in him to the entire forgetfulness of his own feelings.

"Why, Mignonette child, what is the matter?" he asked gently.

The girl started, and drew back from the hand he had laid upon her arm.

"Nothing," she murmured, struggling for control. "Nothing that matters to you."

"What matters to you matters to me. Little one, tell me what has vexed you?"

"I will not!" said Winifred, springing to her feet, and dashing away the tears which clung to her thick lashes. "I am not a child now, and you have no right to ask me, Gerald."

And to his intense amazement, she confronted him, drawn up to her full height, her proud little head held high in the air, her cheeks flushed, and her eyes shining with a strange light of passion and resentment.

His face fell; he knew not what to make of this sudden transformation. Gerald had never seen Winifred in such a mood before, and could not even guess what the explosion portended.

"At least tell me one thing," he said gravely. "Have you seen Theodore Graham?"

"Yes," said Winifred, and her eyes gleamed even more brightly as she spoke. "You told him where to find me. Of course I saw him."

"And what answer did you give him?"

"What answer?" Quick as thought she flung the words at him like the cut of a whip. "Go and ask him if you want to know."

The blow struck home; for once in his life, Gerald was startled out of all self-command.

"You love him, Winifred? For God's sake, tell me the truth!"

"Why, what concern is it of yours?" she returned coldly.

"It is life or death to me! Child, answer; I will know the truth."

He caught her hands, looking into her eyes with the masterful gaze which the girl had never before attempted to resist. She did attempt it now: she tried to draw back and stand upon her dignity, but the look was too much for her passionate revolt, and she murmured at last:

"I am very sorry to disappoint you, but I—sent him away."

"To disappoint me?"

"Yes; he said he came by your wish and approval. I think you might have told me to my face that you are so anxious to get rid of me. As I do not choose to marry Mr. Theodore Graham, I will ask my father to take me out to Australia at once."

A veil fell from Gerald's eyes: the cause of Winifred's displeasure was clear to him in a moment.

"Listen to me," he said quickly. "Theodore had the cheek to ask me to plead his cause with you. I refused, whereupon he asked if he might tell you that he came with my approval. I answered that I approved of anything which would be for your real happiness. My child, my darling, do you not know that I love you with my whole heart and soul, and that I would give more than my life to shield you from pain and harm? I love

you! I love you! but I am only a pauper on your father's charity. I am old and grave and stupid. I have no right to ask you to be my wife."

A marvellous change as Gerald spoke passed over the girl's face: the passion died out of it, her eyes grew soft and dewy, and a light he had never seen before kindled in the lovely downcast features.

"You love me?" she said softly, so softly that he barely caught the words.

"I have loved you always, I believe, but I never knew how much until they threatened to take you from me. Child, I dare scarcely ask you, but can you love me a little?"

She stole a glance at him then through her fringing lashes and saw that, unlike her former self-confident wooer, he was standing before her, pale, grave, and anxious, like a man under trial for his life who fears the verdict will go against him; and at the sight, all Winifred's pride and shyness went to the winds, and she remembered only that he was her hero, her champion, and that she was the child he had saved.

"A little?" she repeated. "Gerald, I have always loved you more than the whole world. Do you think I would have promised to marry Sir Rawdon for anyone but you?"

And scarcely able to believe his senses, Gerald found the gates of Paradise open to him at last, and no stern inward voice bidding him resist the impulse of his heart to take Winifred in his arms and press a lover's kisses on her winsome lips.

"My darling! my darling!" he reiterated passionately. "You love me, you really love me?" and then by degrees he grew a little calmer, and sat down under the rock with his arm still round the girl, holding her as he had held her when she was a little child, and Winifred nestled against his shoulder with shy downcast eyes, the bright colour ebbing and flowing in her cheeks under his look and tone; while to

both the lovers, the wide blue sea, the sweet springtide beauty of the land, the rich mellow sunlight, seemed far too dull and narrow to contain the boundless rapture which possessed their hearts.

"And will you forgive me?" said Winifred at last. "I was horrid to you just now, Gerald; but I really thought you did not care, and wanted me to marry Theo."

"It was all my thundering stupidity in putting off asking you, because I was afraid you might say 'No.' But have you really thought of it, my Nixie? Theo is much younger and better-looking than I, and he has a capital position. You would like living in Paris, child. I shall probably go on humdrumming here for the rest of my days."

"I like humdrumming, and I don't like Theo, except as an acquaintance, he is such a boy," said Winifred contemptuously.

"He is nearly five years older than you," said Gerald with an amused glance.

"He is more than five years younger in his ideas; besides, he cares much more for his eyes and moustaches than for me. Bah! I do hate puppies—except Ruff;" and Winifred laid her hand caressingly on the glossy black coat of the collie, who responded excitedly to his mistress's advances by a frantic attempt to lick her face, for which liberty he was sternly called to order by Gerald.

Peace had scarcely been restored, and the volatile Ruff scampered off to join the fox terrier in a crab hunt, than steps came round the rock, and Winifred started up in confusion at the sight of her father.

"So," said Mr. Vavasour calmly, looking from one to the other, "this is the way the wind blows, is it?" but he did not seem at all displeased, and indeed a twinkle was faintly discernible in his cold eyes as they rested on his daughter's face.

Gerald was on his feet in a moment, a flush on his cheek, and a slight trace of embarrassment in his manner.

"Of course you have the right to expect Winifred to make a better marriage, Mr. Vavasour," he said simply; "but I love her, and she loves me."

"I think it would be rather strange if she didn't," returned her father coolly; "and as to my rights, I have already told you I consider them absolutely *nil*: but I am uncommonly glad she has had the sense to take you instead of that young whipper-snapper Graham. It will be a relief to my mind to feel I leave her with a husband capable of looking after a little flighty impetuous girl. I don't want her poor mother's story repeated over again."

"You are very kind," said Gerald, adding with a smile, "I think I can promise you to take care of the child, if your only anxiety is on that score."

"It is thanks to you and your mother that she is what she is," said Mr. Vavasour sententiously. "If anyone has the right to marry her it is you, Gerald Daubeny, and I should have been decidedly disappointed in her if she had taken any other view of the case."

"It is very rude of father to talk about me as if I wasn't here," broke in Winifred with a laughing pout. "I am not flighty, and I am not impetuous, am I Gerald? And I don't call it taking care of me, to let me be called names to my face."

"Fathers are privileged," replied Gerald, stooping to imprint a kiss on the mischievous lips which effectually silenced their owner. "I can't tell you, Mr. Vavasour," he went on, "how much I feel your great kindness and consideration. I can only assure you from my heart that your trust is not misplaced."

"Humph!" returned Winifred's father gruffly. "If it comes to a strict account of favours conferred, the deficit lies, I fancy, considerably on my side; so, if you please, we will say no more about the matter. I shall settle £10,000 on

Winifred when she marries; and if she chooses to leave the principal in my hands, I will allow her interest at five per cent."

"Oh! father, how good of you!" and Winifred's arms were round his neck in a moment. "Then Gerald needn't go on with that horrid work, and he can stay at home with us and hunt and shoot; and perhaps I can earn some money by my pictures too."

"My dear little girl, you can't think I would agree to live in idleness on your money," said Gerald quickly. "If your father will only find me some work as he promised, I will do my best to perform it, for the sake of my little wife."

"I'll find it," returned Mr. Vavasour dryly, "but there is time enough yet. You two both want a holiday before you take up your life in earnest. I should like to give the child into your hands before I sail, Gerald, but I need not leave England until September. Now perhaps I might mention that Mrs. Daubeny, having already sent you in search of Winifred, has despatched me to ascertain that she is neither drowned nor has fallen over the cliffs, and I promised to return immediately with the news; but if you like to go instead, I should prefer taking a walk round the bay."

"We will both go," said Gerald. "Come, little one," and some minutes later, Mrs. Daubeny, waiting in nervous impatience in the drawing-room, heard the door open, and saw her son approach with Winifred's hand tightly clasped in his. "Mother," he said with a triumphant glow of joy on his handsome face, which told her the truth before the words left his lips, "the child is going to be our very own, at last."

Mrs. Daubeny's face brightened marvellously.

"I am so glad, so thankful," she said. "I thought she would. Come and kiss me, my dear little daughter."

And nervous and confused, the girl was fain to hide her blushing face in the loving embrace of Gerald's mother,

while whispering softly that she was happy, so very happy, she did not feel it could be real.

"And I am so happy that I could almost forgive Rawdon," said Mrs. Daubeny, watching her son's face with intense satisfaction. "He will be furious when he hears of it. My dear boy, you have deserved your reward, if ever man did."

"Oh! I hope Sir Rawdon won't hear of it!" cried Winifred, lifting a lovely startled face. "The last thing he said to me was, that he hated Gerald because I—loved him, and that while he lived I should never be his wife."

"I should like to know how he proposes to hinder it?" said Gerald, with a wrathful gleam in his eyes. "He had better keep his distance from me, if he values a whole skin."

"Don't let us talk of him," said Winifred with a shudder. "It frightens me to think of him. Gerald dear, go and tell Elliot our news. She will be hurt if she does not know at once, and I am—too shy."

She laughed and blushed as she glanced up at him, and before he left the room Gerald stooped and kissed her, lingering for a moment with his arm about her waist, until the girl felt that with him she would be afraid of no one and nothing in the world, not even her dreaded nightmare, the old clock at the inn.

There was nothing to mar her perfect contentment, for Theodore Graham left home on the following day, and had kept his own counsel, as appeared from the unsuspecting warmth with which his family received the news of the engagement.

"I should think you will be very happy," said Nellie. "Gerald is awfully nice. I was more than half inclined to fall in love with him myself, but I do think it is rather tame to marry a man you have known all your life. I would prefer something a little more exciting. You are throwing yourself away, you know;" and she watched, with mischievous amusement, the hot colour which flamed in Winifred's cheeks at her words.

"I only know, I never dreamed it was possible to be so happy as I am now. I would not change places with anyone in the world," cried Winifred indignantly.

"It must be a very odd sensation, being in love," said Miss Nellie meditatively. "I don't think I should like it at all. I prefer other people to be in love with me," and she threw a laughing glance towards a mirror which reflected her comely face and figure and the dancing blue eyes that had learned their power by this time, for it was more than a year since the young lady had left the schoolroom. "You see, you really have seen no one else, Winnie," she continued calmly. "Imagine being married before you have even been to a ball! Your father ought to let you come out at once. There is Lady Norton's dance on the 26th, it would be great fun if you went with us."

"Thank you," said Winifred. "I should like to go to a ball some day, but I don't think Gerald would care for it now. There will be a moon on the 26th, and we used always to go for a row on moonlight evenings in summer."

Nellie shrugged her shoulders, with a mischievous allusion to lovers and lunatics which set Winifred's cheeks again in a blaze, and the two girls as usual tacitly agreed to differ in their widely varying tastes and opinions. From the earliest days of their childish friendship, they had rarely agreed on any one point, although they were heartily attached to each other and had never seriously quarrelled.

May brightened into June, and as the wedding was fixed for the end of August, Winifred began to hold solemn consultations with Mrs. Daubeny over her trousseau—a very important matter to her now, for Gerald's taste had to be considered in every particular, and Gerald held decided views upon the subject of Winifred's attire. Her father gave her *carte blanche* to buy what she pleased, but the girl was determined to have nothing that might seem out of keeping with

her future position as the wife of a comparatively poor man. Mr. Vavasour divided his time between London and Beechhaven Cottage, leaving Gerald, as he had said, to enjoy his holiday in peace; but at the last, towards the end of June, he told his future son-in-law that his presence was imperatively required by the lawyers, if only for a day, and Gerald, who after Mr. Flowers' invasion, disliked the idea of leaving his mother and Winifred unprotected at night, arranged to travel up to town by the first train in the morning, returning the same evening to Beechhaven.

Winifred was up by five o'clock to give him his breakfast, and came to the door to see him off, bidding a bright "Good morning" to the stable boy engaged to assist old Tomlins in his work, a rough-looking lad who had got into trouble for poaching, and who had persuaded Gerald, much against Mrs. Daubeny's wishes, to give him another chance.

"What a lovely morning it is!" she remarked to Gerald. "Why don't we always get up at this hour in summer? I shall go down and have a good swim in the bay;" and she remembered afterwards how the boy's eyes had fastened upon her as she said the words.

She went back into the house, when Gerald had started, to fetch her bathing-dress, and happening to glance out of the window, was surprised to see the stable-boy running across the garden to the wood.

"I hope he is not going to snare the rabbits," she thought, but she forgot him the next moment, for her mind was full of a grand surprise which was to be prepared that day for Gerald.

Winifred's darling ambition was realised: her father, entirely approving her visions of independence, had offered the pictures she had painted in France to a dealer, who had accepted them at once, and with the money she had, unknown to Gerald, bought a little cutter, a sister yacht to the *Petrel*, exactly similar in size and rig. This boat was to be brought

round from Aylsmouth to-day in Gerald's absence, and Winifred could think of nothing but his surprise and wonder when he should see it the next morning at anchor in the bay. She was so happy that she could not walk sedately, and went dancing down the woodland path towards the bay like an embodied vision of joy.

The moment she emerged upon the shore, she saw a sight which effectually damped her high spirits. A large yacht lay at anchor under the cliffs, and with a sudden pang of terror it crossed her mind that this yacht was the *Silence*. She turned instantly to fly towards the house, when, from behind the trees and the neighbouring rocks, around and behind her as if they had risen from the ground, appeared an ambushed party of men, headed by a figure at sight of whom the girl's heart stood still with terror.

"So Winifred," he said, "we meet again. I am afraid Gerald will have to wait a long time for his bride."

The cruel sneer, the cold pitiless glance of the dark eyes, drove Winifred almost frantic with dread. She made one wild vain attempt to break through the ranks of men, and then flinging her arms round a tree, clung with the strength of despair to the trunk, and uttered shriek after shriek for help.

"Gag her," said Sir Rawdon angrily. "Confound you for a set of fools! Do you want to bring all the house about our ears?"

His orders were promptly obeyed, and dislodged by main force from her refuge, bound and helpless, Winifred was carried down to a boat and placed in the stern, with Sir Rawdon at her side.

"I told you that you should never be Gerald's wife," he said with a smile which made the girl tremble more than the harshest threat could have done. "People who know me generally find I have a way of keeping my word."

CHAPTER XXV.

Kidnapped !

KEY stood facing each other in the richly furnished cabin to which the kidnapped girl had been carried. The men had freed her hands before leaving her, and she had lost no time in removing the gag from her mouth, but she made no use of her recovered liberty. The cabin ports were closed, and the yacht lay at anchor a long distance from the shore. There was no possibility that her cries could reach to outside ears, and overhead she could hear the tramp and shouts of the sailors, evidently preparing the yacht for departure. The utter helplessness of her position almost maddened Winifred, but by a strong effort she subdued the well-nigh irresistible impulse prompting her to scream or rave, or to fly like a tigress at her persecutor's throat. She was absolutely at the mercy of her enemy in a ship clearly manned by his creatures, and she could look for neither help nor pity from her captors. Her one resource lay in apparent submission, by which she might be left free to watch for the faintest chance of escape.

Finding her silent, Sir Rawdon spoke, calmly and deliberately :

" You would have done better, Winifred, to have kept your troth with me in spite of your father's ill-judged interference. I would have been good to you, and treated you honourably as my wife ; but a betrothal ring cast at my feet, is a scorn I can neither forget nor forgive," and the singular smile which accompanied the words made the girl's blood run cold with terror.

She retreated as far from him as the limits of the cabin would permit, but Sir Rawdon made no attempt to approach her, and stood watching her white face and terrified eyes with the interested amusement of a cat playing with a mouse.

"How could you think you would escape me?" he went on. "My spies have been about you all the time. I know that your father is in London, and that Gerald has gone up also for the day. By the time your absence has been discovered, and an alarm given, we shall be out of sight of land, even if there were anyone to pursue us. Gerald is not very likely to hear of your abduction before his return home to-night, when, unless the wind drops entirely, you will be beyond the reach of rescue. I should like to see his face when the news is told him."

"Have you no heart?" burst out the girl impetuously. "How has Gerald ever injured you? Think of all he has done for you, Sir Rawdon, how he spared you in that dreadful time at the Towers. He always used to stand up for you, and never would hear a word against you. How can you have the heart to be so cruel to him?"

"Always stood up for me, did he? Then he is a bigger fool than I thought him. So you have found your tongue at last, Miss Winifred. I fancied my precious nephew's name would draw you. You might try a little special pleading on your own account if you like, I don't mind listening. Flowers was right, you can act well enough when you choose."

Winifred bit her lip, and was silent. Silence seemed her sole refuge from her persecutor's cowardly taunts, for she saw that prayers and tears would avail her nothing. She heard the rattling of the chain as the anchor was weighed, and then the lap of the water against the side as the yacht glided through the calm water of the bay.

"You have the whole day before you," continued Sir Rawdon tranquilly; "so if anything should occur to you that

you would like to say to me, you have only to touch this bell. To-night, I hope to have the honour of welcoming you to a house which, aware of your taste for the country and romantic scenery, I had specially prepared for my bride." He paused, and looking straight into the girl's eyes, repeated significantly, "for my bride. I beg, Winifred, that you will do me the justice to-night to remember that it is not my fault if there is no wedding ring on your finger."

She uttered a low cry, and covered her face with her hands, but only for a moment: in the next, she was confronting her captor with eyes and looks ablaze with indignation.

"You dare not!" she cried passionately; "you dare not; Gerald would kill you!"

"He would have to find me first," he answered with his sinister smile, "and this house is very retired Winifred, very retired indeed. A better prison than Willow Lodge, and I flatter myself I shall be an even sharper gaoler than good Mrs. Monk. The servants in the house are quite prepared for your arrival. They know me as an unfortunate gentleman, afflicted with a mad wife to whom, however, he is devotedly attached, and whom he moves about from place to place in the hope that change may do her good; for it is a curious fact, Winifred, that her madness takes the form of impelling her to escape from her husband, declaring she is not his wife, and that he has carried her away by force from her friends. The servants are quite prepared for this, and they know also that their master can manage his wife best when quite alone with her, and that, whatever they may hear, they are on no account to enter her suite of rooms without his express permission."

"You could not keep me shut up for ever," cried Winifred, trying to speak calmly, although she was shuddering in every limb. "Do you care nothing for your reputation, Sir

Rawdon, even if you are clever enough to elude punishment?"

"Who is to know you have run away with me?" he answered coolly. "My men are mostly Sicilian sailors, who think no more of an abduction than a song. The rocks and the water will tell no tales; and as for yourself, your last imprisonment brought you nearly to death's door. Where I am taking you now, if natural causes fail, there are ways and means of disposing of a crazy wife, without bringing any suspicion on her husband. You need not think you will ever leave my hands alive."

"Then for God's sake, show me one mercy," supplicated the girl in a very passion of despair, throwing herself on her knees at Sir Rawdon's feet. "Kill me at once, or let me kill myself."

"*Pas si bête,*" he answered with a smile. "You are too pretty, Winifred. You have improved wonderfully in the last three months. Stand up; you can't pick up the ring you threw away by humbling yourself now, but it is extremely becoming that flush on your face, and your eyes are as bright as the diamonds in the ring. I wonder I don't kiss you; but I have waited so long, I can afford to wait—until to-night."

He turned to leave the cabin, but paused a moment with his hand upon the lock.

"As I cannot, with the best intentions, grant your request, and permit you to commit suicide, will you give me your word of honour to abstain, while you are in this cabin from any attempt upon your life? If you will not give me the promise, I shall be compelled to have you tied down, as you were brought on board, and watched by my crew. There are no women on the *Silence.*"

"I give you my promise," said Winifred, eager at any rate to escape the alternative. "If you do not come near me,

I will make no attempt to kill myself while I am in this cabin. But, Sir Rawdon," she added passionately, "why are you so cruel to me? You do not really love me. It is only a whim, a fancy, and for this, you tear me from my home, where I was happy," and her voice faltered,—"oh, so happy!—and refuse to show me even the mercy you showed my mother. Kill me, strike me down as you struck her, and throw me overboard; no one will ever know. You will have punished Gerald for his crime of loving me, and I will thank and bless you for the deed. Ah! do not turn away: you loved once, I know you loved your wife Liliæ. She was an angel of goodness and beauty. What would she have thought of the thing you are doing now? She was fond of me, she kissed me the very night she died. How will you answer to her for your treatment of me? For her sake, have pity, and let me die, if you will not set me free."

"Yes," he said, breathing hard with a fierce light in his eyes, "you do well to remind of the past. I loved her, and she might have saved me, but she was torn from me without pity, without remorse. Meet her again, you say. If there is a future world, will not the curse which brought her death follow me even there? Meet her again, to see her lying with her sweet white face, and those ghastly marks upon her throat! I would rather burn for ever, like the souls in Dante's hell. Torture and death! Why should I be the only one to suffer? Your lover shall know what it is to agonize in the throes of black despair, to feel the life blood wrung drop by drop from his heart by the grip of a horror from which no mortal strength can free him. I will make him drink to the dregs the cup which was held to mine; yet Heaven knows his sufferings can be but pin-pricks compared to mine—compared to mine!" A shudder ran through his frame, and a strange red light shone in his eyes, when, by an evident effort, he regained his self-control. "At last the power is in

my hands," he said more quietly. " You scorned me, Winifred; you shall pay the penalty for that scorn."

He passed through the door, locking it behind him; and the girl, with one stifled cry of agony, flung herself face downwards on a couch. In one instant to have fallen from Paradise to this bottomless gulf of horror and despair! She was stunned by the bolt which had descended upon her out of a clear sky. It seemed too cruel, too revoltingly impossible to be true, yet she could hear the soft splash of the waves against the side, and even feel a slight rolling motion, as before the north-westerly breeze the *Silence* stood swiftly out to sea. She could not cheat herself into even the momentary respite of believing it all a dream; and, rising to her feet, she began a feverish examination of her prison. It was of fair dimensions, furnished as a dressing-room, containing an escritoire supplied with writing materials, and bookshelves filled with French and English novels. The door was firmly locked, but the port-holes were merely closed, and yielded at once to Winifred's eager fingers. She saw the blue sea sparkling in the summer sunshine, and beyond it the line of cliffs with the very headlands guarding the bay, and the bright-green of the beechwoods stretching up towards her home. She saw it all, and stood with hands locked together, and a look of agony on her white face, watching, with dumb, despairing eyes, as the familiar outline grew gradually dim and indistinct, fading at last into the golden haze of sunlight flooding the lonely coast; and Winifred knew that, in all human probability, she had looked her last on all that was dear to her in life. She thought of her pledge to Sir Rawdon. Need she consider it binding in her present desperate plight? But she had always held a promise sacred; and now, in her full health and strength, Death appeared in a very different guise than the one he had worn to the hopeless prisoner at Willow Lodge. She had every cause to make her

cling to life, if only she could escape from her captor. She was no longer enslaved by a tyranny supported by the strong hand of so-called Justice. Sir Rawdon was trampling on every law of God and man, and she knew, wherever he might take her, she had only to obtain a hearing to bring ready human hands and hearts to her aid. If there were any truth in his words, she had nothing to fear while on board the yacht, and surely he could not succeed in taking her ashore without some notice being attracted to his prisoner. A faint ray of hope woke in Winifred's heart: she was young and sanguine, and there was the whole long summer-day before her. Who could tell what might have happened before the now mounting sun should set in the far north-west, and the lingering Midsummer gloaming fade into the dread black night?

The door opened, and the steward brought in some breakfast, of which the girl forced herself to partake. She must keep up her strength, that her brain might be clear and active, prompt to perceive and grasp the faintest chance of escape which might arise. Fearing, however, that the food might be drugged, she ate only the very plainest, and drank nothing but cold water. She noticed that she was supplied with a silver knife—Sir Rawdon evidently feared to trust her with steel—while the opening door had shown her two sailors posted as sentries outside the cabin. Clearly no deliverance could be looked for while on board the yacht.

The morning hours went by: the *Silence* sailed before the steady breeze, and from the position of the sun Winifred saw that they were evidently steering for the coast of France; but the wind was not very strong, and she comforted herself that it would be a long while before they reached it. The more she considered her position, the more she longed for a weapon of defence. There were many foreign curiosities collected in the cabin, and she began to ransack the contents

of the drawers in hopes of coming upon some forgotten blade or dagger. She found nothing, however; her captors had taken care of that; and on asking for a knife, when the steward brought in her luncheon, the man answered respectfully that his master had forbidden him to bring one into the cabin, and as the meal consisted entirely of made dishes, Winifred was scarcely able to urge the plea of necessity.

She hardly quitted the port-hole for a moment as the day wore on. She did not feel quite so helpless when she could catch a glimpse of another vessel in the distance; but late in the afternoon she saw a sight which made her heart sink, and brought the look of terror back to her eyes—a faint misty line upon the verge of the horizon, the distant coast of France. Slowly, very slowly, it grew upon her trembling gaze, but clearer with every moment, as the *Silence* steadily pursued her course. The wind had shifted to the westward, and increased considerably in strength; and after a time the yacht was put about, and began to beat down Channel, approaching with every tack nearer to the cliff-bound coast. She had been beating for rather more than an hour, and was sailing on the starboard-tack quite close in to shore, when it suddenly struck Winifred that there was something strangely familiar in the low yellow cliffs, the wooded undulating country; and when the ship went about, she caught sight of a grey house amongst the trees, and knew in a moment that she was sailing almost within a stone's throw of her old refuge, La Ferrière. She was wildly excited by the discovery. If only she could communicate with the Abbé he might do something to save her; for from the manœuvres of the yacht, it was evident that Sir Rawdon intended landing somewhere on this coast. Scanning the shore with eager eyes, she perceived a small fishing-boat not far distant, and recognised it as belonging to the convent. She had often gone out fishing on summer evenings with the sisters and the old man who

sailed the boat. It seemed now to be at anchor, and a sudden hope sprang up in Winifred's mind that on the next tack the *Silence* might pass within hailing distance of the boat. Yet would its occupants hear or understand what she said? She thought of the two sentries at the door, and of how easily she might again be bound and gagged. It would be impossible to make noise enough to attract the attention of the fishing-boat without betraying herself to her watchful gaolers. She racked her brains to think of some expedient. She might tie a piece of paper round a weight, and try to throw it into the boat; but even if the yacht approached near enough, she dared not trust her aim, and risk everything on such a desperate chance. The missile ought to be something that would float until the sisters could pick it up, and yet sufficiently heavy to carry far enough through the air to attract their attention by striking the water near the boat. Suddenly a light leapt into the girl's eyes: she sprang to one of the drawers she had ransacked in the morning, and drew out a silver-mounted gourd flask which closed with a strong spring snap. It was empty; and seating herself at the *escritoire*, she wrote some hurried lines in French:—

“*Bien cher et Reverend Père*,—I am a prisoner on board this yacht the *Silence*, carried off from Beechhaven this morning by Sir Rawdon Daubeny. He says he is taking me to a lonely house, which we shall reach to-night. For an hour we have been beating down the coast. Save me, *mon père*, for the love of Heaven.

“WINIFRED.”

Hastily enclosing this note in an envelope, she wrote on the outside:—

“My Sisters,—Carry this instantly to the good father if you wish to save from worse than death your little English friend,

“WINIFRED.”

Rolling up the envelope, she placed it in the gourd; and, finding that she had time to spare, she scratched with the

pin of her brooch upon the silver mounting, before and behind the neck of the bottle, the word "*Ouvrez.*" Then, grasping it firmly in her hand, she approached the port-hole. The yacht was again sailing on the starboard-tack, and, to the girl's joy, the little fishing-boat seemed to lie almost across her bows, and would evidently be passed upon the left-hand side. Her heart beat wildly, but her eyes and hand were steady as she stood waiting, measuring the distance which divided them from the boat. She saw the dear, familiar brown robes of the sisters, the close-fitting white headdresses under the black veils, and could almost distinguish the features of the bright, kindly faces, when, sharp on her ears, came the word of command for the yacht to go about. The crew of the *Silence* were smart, but Winifred was quicker still. The gourd flew from her hand, and plunged into the water not many yards short of the boat. She had just time to see it rise again to the surface, the silver top flashing in the sunlight as it mounted the crest of a wave—just time to recognise that her special friend, Sœur Melanie, was in the boat, when the yacht swung round upon the port-tack, and trembling all over, now that her task was accomplished, the girl sank down upon the couch.

Would the occupants of the boat see the flask? and if they saw it, possess sufficient curiosity to pick it up? were the questions which tormented her brain; and she waited in feverish suspense until the yacht turned again, and she could once more see the now distant boat. At the first glimpse her heart gave a wild throb of joy and thankfulness. The heavy oars were unshipped, and the fishing-boat was making straight for land. Of course it might merely mean that the sisters' work was over for the day; but glancing at her watch, Winifred saw it was only seven o'clock, and she remembered that it was never their custom to return home before the hour for the last service in the chapel at half-past

eight, as they always took their supper with them in the boat. If they had found her note, and carried it straight to the *père*, she might be saved; for mounted on his strong little mare, he would easily be able to overtake and keep the yacht in sight, so long as she held on her present course. Absorbed in this new hope, Winifred started when the cabin-door opened, and Sir Rawdon appeared, followed by two sailors.

"I am sorry for the necessity," he said, "but as we are passing near a town, I prefer to put it out of your power to give an alarm;" and at a sign from him, Winifred was again gagged, and her hands bound behind her.

The ports were closed, and she was left alone once more, until from the sounds on deck she fancied they must be entering the harbour of St. Etienne. She heard the rattle of the anchor, and, expecting to be carried off the yacht, prepared herself for a determined struggle the moment she should reach the shore, which might serve to reveal to the spectators the fact that she was held a prisoner against her will. No steps, however, approached her prison, and she presently caught the dip of oars as if a boat were being rowed from the yacht. Then followed a period of waiting, in which Winifred's excitement and suspense rose almost to fever pitch; when, after some delay, she heard the sound of the boat's return, the anchor was weighed, and the yacht again proceeded on her course.

Surely she was moving much faster, Winifred thought, judging from the sharp dash of the water against the side; and why were those shrill steamer whistles so constantly sounding just ahead? It was almost dark in the cabin, but the steward presently entered, bringing lights and dinner, which Winifred could not touch. He released her from her bonds, and in a moment she had opened the port-hole, and looked out into the clear, still twilight. On a parallel course, not far distant from the shore, the *Silence* was flying with

strange speed through the water, and the girl's ears soon ascertained, although she was not able to see, the cause of her progression. The yacht was in tow of a steam-tug—the wind had fallen at sunset—and through the comparatively calm water the two vessels were speeding at a pace that made Winifred's heart sink with dismay. The coast-line was rough and rugged, intersected with deep bays and creeks. It was clearly impossible in the deepening twilight for the most determined horseman to keep the yacht in view, and she wrung her hands in despair as she realised the certain failure of her hopes.

On and on, while the sunset glows faded in the west, the stars began to glimmer in the pure blue heavens, and a soft, dreamy light from the newly-risen moon stole over the dark sea and quiet land. Still watching by the port-hole, Winifred suddenly perceived the moon herself, apparently at the full, floating in silver glory in the starlit sky, and she knew that the vessels must have changed their course. The next moment the moon was obscured by the black outline of a cliff, as the tug steamed on into a deep sheltered bay. The tow-line was cast off, the *Silence* dropped her anchor, and a few minutes later the tug steamed off on her return. And now, at last, the voyage seemed at an end. Winifred's prison was invaded by half-a-dozen men, and in a moment she was gagged and bound as before, while a cloak was thrown over her head, and, narrowly escaping suffocation, she was carried up on deck and lowered into the bottom of a boat.

"Idiots! you have half smothered her," she heard Sir Rawdon say; and then the cloak was thrown back from her face, and she was lifted into a sitting posture in the stern.

She was amazed at the beauty of the scene that met her eyes: the still water of the bay shimmering in the moonlight, with the sharp black shadows of cliff and tree flung on its shining surface, and the fair white strand beneath the fir-

crowned crags imposing in their lofty might and grandeur. But the silence and solitude struck a terror to Winifred's heart which all the dreamy beauty could not soothe. It seemed to her in its lonely majesty a spot which human foot had never trodden before. If her prison-house was situated within those gloomy woods, it was indeed vain to hope for rescue or escape. Despair seized upon her, and with a sudden movement, which took her captors by surprise, she gained her feet and tried to spring over the side of the boat into the sea. Sir Rawdon was too quick for her; he alone, of all the men, was on his feet at the same moment, and seized her in his arms, holding her despite her struggles until, by his orders, her ankles were bound together, and, utterly helpless, she was laid at the bottom of the boat. A few minutes later it grounded on the sand, and, placed in a hammock, Winifred was carried by a couple of sailors up a steep path into the wood, while Sir Rawdon walked at her side, his hand resting lightly on her arm. She could see his face, its natural pallor enhanced by the gleams of moonlight which fell athwart the path, and his dark eyes shining with a weird lurid glitter. Surely he was more fiend than man; and horrible stories of vampires and evil spirits flashed into the girl's mind, and added a keener edge to the terrors of her position. The men seemed scarcely to feel the weight of her slight form, and proceeded at a rapid pace, keeping up with Sir Rawdon, who walked with hurried, uneven steps.

At last Winifred heard the barking of a dog, lights appeared amongst the trees, and, passing through an archway, she found herself in a small room, where an old man and woman bowed low to Sir Rawdon, who addressed them in rapid French.

"Madame had arrived," he told them; "but she had been very violent upon the journey, and they had been forced to bind her to prevent her from attempting her life. If the rooms were ready, he would at once proceed upstairs."

"But yes, the rooms were quite prepared; they had received monsieur's *dépêche*. Poor madame!" and they glanced commiseratingly at Winifred's eyes and forehead, which were all that could be seen from the folds of the cloak by which she was enveloped. "And monsieur had no fear to be alone with her?" the old woman asked.

"No, monsieur could manage her;" and a grim smile played round Sir Rawdon's lips. "She might scream, but that was nothing; mad women always screamed. They must not be alarmed at the sound."

And then he bade the old man take his candle and light them up the stairs.

The sailors, with their burden, followed the light through a stone passage, cold and clammy as a vault, and up a steep, winding staircase, to the door of a long, low room, with windows sunk in the thickness of the walls. They crossed it, the dark polished boards echoing to their tread, and through a low-arched door entered a bedroom beyond, where, at a sign from Sir Rawdon, they laid the girl, still bound and gagged, upon a couch placed against the wall.

"You may go," he said in Italian to the men. "*Bon soir, Pierre!*" and having seen the three out of the room, he locked the door and put the key in his pocket.

"What do you think of my prison, Winifred?" he said, returning to her side. "It is not the first time this old castle has been put to such a use. There are strange tales told of Chateau Noir, and few people care to approach the place at night. I hardly fancy you will escape me here."

He stooped and unbound her ankles, then her mouth, and lastly released her hands, when, with a spring that almost threw him off his balance, the girl started to her feet, and struggled so desperately to free herself from his grasp, that she succeeded in snatching a heavy silver candlestick from the table and aiming a fierce blow at his head.

He dashed it from her hand.

"You vixen," he said; "you will be tame enough tomorrow;" and holding her by the shoulders, he looked with a cruel smile into her face, wild with fear and horror.

She threw out her hands against his chest, exerting her utmost strength to keep him at arm's length; and for a moment they stood thus, face to face, while in the sudden stillness Winifred could hear the beating of her heart and the ticking of the watch she wore in a bracelet on her wrist. Her eyes were fastened on that pallid, mocking face, and, little by little, as she looked she saw a mysterious change pass over the haughty features. The deep-set eyes seemed to glow and darken with a strange smouldering fire, the pencilled brows contracted, the nostrils dilated, and the lips receded from the white, even teeth as the lips of a dog are drawn back in act to bite. From the broad brow the resolution and purpose faded, to be replaced by a blind, senseless rage; the smouldering fire in the eyes beneath it burst into flame—no longer of human intelligence and reason, but blazing with murderous hate and fury; and as she watched, the eyeballs seemed convulsed, and rolled until little but the whites were visible. In one horrible instant Winifred realised the truth—she was looking into the face of a madman!

Her eyes had caught and held him for the moment spell-bound by her gaze. She felt her power, and threw all her strength of will into the look she kept fixed upon his face; and for what seemed to her an age-long eternity, they stood gazing thus into each other's eyes. Then a sudden noise startled the girl's already overstrained nerves; for one second her gaze wavered, and her power was at an end.

She heard a cry like a wild beast darting on its prey, felt herself flung backwards on the couch, and uttered a shriek, which was abruptly cut short by the grip of the madman's hands upon her throat.

CHAPTER XXVI.

The Abbé to the Rescue.

ABOUT seven o'clock on the same evening the Abbé Connois had been kneeling at his devotions in the pretty little cemetery of La Ferrière. No English garden could be better tended and watered than the wealth of flowers growing above each grave, from which rose the wooden cross bearing the name of the sister, orphan, or patient who had been laid at rest beneath. On one side of the cemetery the rock sloped steeply down to the river; on the others, it was shaded by fine old trees. Here, on summer evenings, the Abbé always resorted to say his *office*, and pray amongst his dead; and, knowing his custom, no inmate of the convent dreamed of approaching the cemetery, or disturbing him until his prayers were at an end. This evening, however, in the very midst of his devotions, a slender brown-robed figure, with her skirt looped back over her dark petticoat, and her black veil flying behind her from the speed with which she ran, came darting up the rocky path, and, panting and breathless, held out a silver-mounted gourd before the eyes of the astonished Abbé.

"My father!" she gasped, "it is a message from our little English lady. Read, only read what she has written, the poor child!" and drawing the letter from the gourd, she waited breathlessly while the Abbé opened and read it.

"How did this come to you, Sœur Melanie?" he said, looking keenly at the girl's flushed handsome face.

"Figure to yourself, *mon père*," she replied eagerly, "that while we were fishing, a sailing ship approached us beating

down towards St. Etienne, and as it passed I thought I saw something thrown from the port-hole. It fell into the water and floated near our boat, and we saw the sun glitter on something bright; so we went to pick it up, and found this bottle with the letter inside."

The Abbé left his prayers unfinished and hurried towards the house, while, scarcely waiting for his bidding, Sœur Melanie ran to the stables, and saddling the chestnut mare brought her round to the door. The Abbé was already waiting, and in another moment had ridden off at a canter in the direction of St. Etienne, his *soutane* tucked back over his rusty black knickerbockers, his beaver hat set firmly on his head. With all his haste, the English yacht had reached the harbour before him, and he rode down to the quay just in time to see her leaving in tow of the tug. The Abbé, however, did not seem disheartened by his failure; he waited long enough to note the course the vessels were taking, and then rode to the Gendarmerie, where he had a hurried interview with the head of the police. The Abbé Connois was well known and respected in St. Etienne, to which Paris prejudices had not penetrated, and when, a few minutes later, he resumed his ride, he was accompanied by four mounted gendarmes. Through country lanes, over wastes of sandy heath, past hamlet and wood, the priest held on untiringly, more than once, indeed, having to wait for his escort, who were not accustomed to such sudden bouts of hard riding. They were taking a short-cut across country which seemed familiar to the Abbé, for he never once faltered nor made a wrong turning in the twilight, riding always slightly ahead of the policemen, while the full-moon rose behind them, and the shadows of the trees lay black and deep across their path. The men talked in whispers, when the nature of the ground compelled their horses to walk; they did not fancy the errand upon which they were bound. Chateau Noir bore a bad repute in

the country-side; strange stories were told of its old lords, and its walls had been the scene of a terrible retribution at the time of the Revolution. Evil deeds had been done within them sufficient to furnish material for a dozen tales of haunted houses, and the men of Normandy are not altogether proof against superstitious terrors. It was some consolation to the escort that they were conducted by a priest, but each crossed himself and muttered a fervent prayer as they entered the gloomy firwoods stretching to the verge of the Chateau grounds. The sudden hooting of an owl brought the hearts of the gallant gendarmes to their mouths, and they felt far from comfortable when, at a short distance from the house, the Abbé bade them dismount and fasten their horses to the trees. He did not wish to give an alarm by the clatter of the horse-hoofs drawing up before the door.

Approaching the old gateway, he knocked, and Pierre's voice called out :

“Who is there?”

“The Abbé Connois,” was the answer, and the door was opened in a moment.

“M. l'Abbé, so late!” muttered the old man, peering into the visitor's face.

“You know me, my friend,” said the Abbé quietly. “I have come to see your master. Has he arrived yet?”

“Yes, monsieur had arrived and retired to rest. Pierre had that moment returned from lighting him and madame to their rooms.”

“No matter, I must see him,” said the priest peremptorily. “Go and announce to monsieur that I am here.”

Pierre drew back. He was very sorry to disoblige M. l'Abbé, but he dared not disobey his master's orders, and intrude upon him at such an hour. Also, it would be useless, he knew, for he had heard him lock the outer door.

“Follow me,” said the Abbé to the men outside, and, to

Pierre's consternation, the four gendarmes tramped through the gateway and proceeded behind their leader to the stone passage, passing the staircase up which Winifred had been carried, until, bearing the light which he had taken from the *concierge*, the priest entered a large bare panelled room, and proceeded to examine a recess by the fireplace. The gendarmes gasped as a panel started from its place, revealing a narrow staircase contrived in the thickness of the wall, but they closely followed their guide as he hurried up the steps, opened a concealed door at the top, and dashed into the lighted room beyond. Such a horrible cry greeted their ears as they entered, followed by a woman's shriek, that the men fell back from the threshold, stumbling over each other in their terror, when the Abbé called in a voice of thunder : "Cowards ! will you see murder done before your eyes ?" and threw himself single-handed upon the girl's assailant.

Realising then that it was human beings, and not phantoms with whom they had to deal, the gendarmes' courage returned in a moment, but it took their united strength to tear the madman's hands from his victim's throat.

He yelled and raved, swearing volubly in English.

"The clock ! the clock !" he shouted. "I must stop the cursed ticking ! It is in my ears, it tortures my brain, it is round me, over me—God of Heaven *it is me !*"

Wrenching himself from the gendarmes' grasp, he dashed towards the window, flung the casement open, and before they could stop him, had sprung headforemost through the aperture.

"*Mon Dieu*, it is a madman !" cried the horrified men, and they hurried down the staircase, leaving the priest alone with Winifred, who, gasping painfully for breath, was struggling slowly back to full life and consciousness.

He bathed her face and raised her head, giving her water to drink, and soothing her terror with gentle words and kindly looks, until the girl at last found voice to speak.

"*Mon père*," she murmured in a faint whisper, "where is he?"

A shadow crossed the Abbé's face.

"The men who came with me are looking after him," he said. "Do not tremble so, my child. You are quite safe with me."

"And you will not leave me?" she implored. "I think I should die of fear if I were to be left alone. That horrible face—shall I ever get it out of my sight? You saw him, *mon père*, did you not, and you saw that he was—*mad*?"

She said the last word below her breath, sinking her voice to a whisper.

"Yes, he was mad," said the Abbé sternly. "Heaven forgive my folly in not suspecting the truth before, I who knew—" He broke off, adding in a different tone: "Thank God, my child, that you at least are saved. When he was dragged off you he tried to end his own life by jumping from that window. I fear he may need me, Winifred. Do you think you can walk, for I ought to go downstairs?"

"He jumped out of the window!" cried the girl, starting up in horror. "I did not know it. Oh! *mon père* let us go; only pray, pray, do not let me see him." She rose, and then first discovered the secret staircase by which her rescuers had entered the room. "I think my senses are gone," she said, pressing her hand to her head. "I have taken it all for granted, and never even thanked you for saving me, nor wondered how you came here."

"I had your note," he said. "I knew that Sir Rawdon owned this house, and I was also acquainted with the secret entrance to this room. That is all. I want no thanks, my child; give them to Heaven. I only wish with all my heart I had arrived in time to save you from such a terrible experience."

He led her down the stairs, across the empty room, and down the passage, where a gendarme met them.

"I was coming to seek you, M. l'Abbé," he said. "The gentleman is alive and is asking for you. He seems quite sensible, but he will not let us move him; he says he will die where he is."

"Die!" echoed the priest in horror. "Is he so much hurt? My child," and he turned to Winifred, "I must leave you with Jeanette."

"One moment," she said. "Is it possible to send news of my safety to Beechhaven?"

"I telegraphed to Mr. Daubeny from the Gendarmerie when I was waiting for the men, to say that I was following the yacht and hoped to save you. I will send another telegram now by the messenger who rides to fetch the doctor. They may despatch it at once from the railway station; if not, it will be forwarded the moment the office is open in the morning. This is the kitchen;" and opening a door, he ushered Winifred into a clean, bright room tenanted by the old woman, who shrank back in alarm at sight of the priest's companion.

"Tell her I am not mad," said Winifred quickly in English. "She believes I am his mad wife. That is what he told her."

The Abbé gave the required explanation, waiting until he saw that it had penetrated the comprehension of the simple-minded old peasant woman already bewildered by the shock of her master's accident. Jeanette would have indignantly refused to believe the news if told her by anyone else than the good priest of La Ferrière, whom she held in the deepest veneration; but his word was gospel, and when she had once understood, her pity and concern for Winifred knew no bounds. She dragged in a folded iron bedstead, of the kind usually kept in reserve in French houses, supplied it with pillows and mattresses and insisted on the exhausted girl lying down upon it. Then she warmed some *bouillon* in a

cup and made her drink it, and finally, devoured by curiosity, sat down by her side, and drew from her the whole story of her abduction and rescue. It was a relief to Winifred to tell it all now that she was safe in the snug bright kitchen with its sanded floor and spotless furniture, and Jeanette's rosy face under its clean white cap at her side, while the old woman's hands and eyebrows were uplifted in horror, and she could hardly find words strong enough to express her pity and indignation.

"I should like to know how your master is," said Winifred at last; "only pray don't leave me, Jeanette."

So Jeanette opened the door and called to Pierre, who informed her that the injured man, refusing to be moved, had been left with the priest, while two of the gendarmes had ridden to fetch a doctor, and the other two were waiting with Pierre until the Abbé summoned them.

The night wore on, old Jeanette dozed in her chair, and Winifred sank into a sleep of utter exhaustion, from which she was roused by Jeanette's voice calling:

"Mademoiselle! Ah! the poor child, it is cruel to wake her. Mademoiselle, here is M. l'Abbé wishing to speak to you."

Bewildered and only half awake, Winifred, who had lain down fully dressed, rose at once and went to the door, where she found the Abbé waiting.

"My child," said the priest gravely, "I am sorry to rouse you, but I come as a suppliant from a dying man. Sir Rawdon entreats that you will come to him."

The girl shrank back in dismay.

"Oh! no, no!" she cried. "*Mon père*, do not ask me; I cannot do it."

"I understand your reluctance," he said, "but I think for your own sake it is better that you should see him in his right mind; and, Winifred, he is dying, he has not many

minutes to live, and he says he cannot die in peace without your forgiveness. Can you grant it to him, my child?"

"I forgive him what he has done to me," she answered quickly, "but not to Gerald—never, never! He put him in prison, and tried to ruin him, and he has carried me off now because Gerald loves me. No, I should not be true to Gerald if I forgave his enemy. I will never forgive him for it."

"Come with me," said the Abbé authoritatively, fixing his dark eyes on the girl's excited face, and Winifred dared not disobey.

He wrapped a cloak round her and led her into the open air. The short summer night was over, the dawn was breaking bright and clear behind the dark stems of the firs, and all around brooded a strange, solemn stillness, the lingering swoon of night ere the great heart of day sent its glad life-springs pulsing through the world. The high-pointed roof of the old castle reared its hoary head towards the paling stars, and the moon looked wan and ghostly facing the growing splendours of the sunrise. On the eastern side of the castle the crag, on which it was built, fell sharply to a depth of many feet, and at its base lay the injured man, still in the position in which he had fallen, stretched on a low mossy rock. Winifred was trembling from head to foot out of sheer physical dread of seeing him again, but her first glance served to reassure her. A thick rug covered the injured limbs from sight, the handsome features had escaped untouched, and the head and neck were swathed in bandages. Always pale, there was nothing unusual in Sir Rawdon's white face, which looked calm and peaceful; for the fierce pain which had racked him through the night had left him, as he well knew, before the approach of death, and his eyes sought Winifred's face with a pleading, deprecating gaze, against which the girl could not steel her heart. The doctor, who was bending over

his patient, moved away with the Abbé a few steps out of hearing, and the two were left together, Winifred shrinking a little as she stood with the cloak gathered round her, and the rosy light in the east falling on her lovely timid face and uncovered head.

Sir Rawdon watched her with an expression she had never seen in his eyes before, something of the grave tenderness with which he had regarded his dead wife, but all fire and passion had died out of his looks.

"I hardly dared to hope that you would come to me," he said in his deep low voice, "but I long to tell you the truth before I die. I have been your evil genius, Winifred, as I was to your mother before you. Thank God that I was not allowed to do my worst on you. You have learned my secret now, the curse under which I was born, the fatal inheritance of intermittent madness which came to me from my mother's family. I knew the taint of madness was in my blood—passion and madness, who can mark the boundary line between the two? I knew it, and I was warned by one who had learned from his own experience that it was in my power to gain the mastery over this terrible curse. He was my mother's only surviving brother, and he had become a priest—you know him, Winifred, the Abbé Connois. He read my character by his own, and he told me that by avoiding love and passion I might keep down the madness in my blood. I believed him; and though I could not bring myself to enter the priesthood, I lived as a very monk until, before I was aware of my danger, I had passed the rubicon and fallen madly in love with your mother. You know her story. I struggled—God alone knows how I struggled—with my passion: but when I learned she was at 'The Duke's Head' Inn it seemed that invisible cords were drawing me to her. I meant no wrong, I would not have harmed her for the world; but when your father was gone, she turned upon me, reproaching

me with having destroyed her life and happiness. Her scorn and anger maddened me; for the first time my reason tottered, and, not knowing what I did, I struck her down against the clock. The frenzy did not last long, it never has, and I came to myself to see the woman I loved stretched dead at my feet, and to know myself a madman and a murderer. No words can describe the tortures I endured. I would willingly have given myself up to justice to escape them, but I knew the Judge would show me no mercy. I was mad, mad, and therefore doomed to live. The blessed gift of death would be denied me, and I slunk home in the summer dawning with my secret buried in my heart. I thought to resume my old life, but I had yielded once to passion, and my peace was for ever gone. The slightest sound from watch or clock brought to my mind the terrible tick, tick of the old clock at the inn, and the picture of Renée's white face lying at its foot, and I standing by, her murderer; and I found, if I listened long the madness would begin to return upon me, especially if at the time I was labouring under the effects of excitement. My will was weakened, as the Abbé had warned me would be the case, although I dared not confide in him now. My fancy was caught by a girl's pretty face; I resolved to be an ascetic no longer, and married her, hoping to obtain forgetfulness in her love. The night we spent at her uncle's house I lay awake listening to the ticking of a great clock outside my room, until, despite my efforts at self-restraint, I felt my reason was going.

"What happened I do not know, but I woke to my senses in the grey morning light, to find myself alone in the room, before an open window. I think, in her terror at my madness, my wife must have jumped through it to escape me. I can hardly believe I threw her out. The horror sobered me, and I solemnly vowed before God never again to think of love and marriage. You know, Winifred, how that vow was

kept. I loved Lilius well enough to sacrifice my own happiness for her; but she loved me, and I could not give her pain. I thought I had taken every precaution, but my very love and anxiety turned my brain. I was not myself the night I drove home from Kenningborough. I should never have stopped at the inn, but I heard the servants whisper that I was mad, and I dreaded nothing so much as my secret becoming known. The ticking of the clock reached plainly to the room overhead in which they put me, and I was wild with anxiety for Lilius. Hardly knowing what I did, I found myself walking to The Towers. I entered with my latch-key, and went up to her room. She was asleep, and I bent over her to assure myself of her safety, when my ear was caught by the ticking of a watch. I remember nothing more till I woke to find her dead, and knew that I had killed her. The cry which you heard I uttered in my agony and despair, as I fled from the room by the window,—for I dared not pass the bed to reach the door,—longing only to put the distance of the world between myself and the scene of my madness. Her watch, that they found outside, I must have thrown out of the window after I killed her. I remember nothing of it. I don't know how I got back to the inn. It was not until my servant woke me in the morning that I came back fully to myself, and I resolved still to keep my secret. It was not I who had killed my darling, it was the fiend which a Higher Power had permitted to possess my brain. The responsibility for the deed was not mine, but my Maker's. From that moment I gave up every attempt to retrieve my errors, and as my will grew weaker I had less and less power to resist the impulses of passion. I never went near the Abbé now, but, fearing he might suspect the truth, I wrote him an account of my wife's death, carefully suppressing some of the facts. All I cared for was to hide my secret, and seek silence from the sounds which

brought torture and madness to my brain. God knows that if I have sinned I have suffered, surely more than any living man. On my soul, Winifred, I do not know whether I am responsible for my treatment of you. The first sight of your face last year revived my old passion for your mother; and I had flung away my powers of resistance, and could only blindly seek to gratify the cravings of my senses. Death has cleared the mists from my brain. I see that right and wrong are real and irreconcilable as night and day, yet who can define the moment when the one fades into the other? I was wrong; I might have conquered the evil born in me as my uncle has done, for the same wild blood runs in both our veins. I wish with all my heart that I had acted differently, but I could receive no greater punishment than to be forced to live my life over again."

He paused, exhausted. Only the strength of his will could have carried him through the story he had determined to relate, and he now looked up at the girl standing by his side, the death-dews gathering on his forehead, and a film beginning to cloud his pleading dark eyes.

"You know the truth now, Winifred. From my heart I am sorry for the wrong I have done you and Gerald. Try to think of me as kindly as you can. I dare not ask for your forgiveness."

There was a look of horror on Winifred's face. Her quick imagination had filled in with scenes of terror the bald outlines of the tale to which she had listened, but she could not pause now to consider how much, or how little, Sir Rawdon was to blame. She comprehended the dread horror of the curse under which he had been born, and her heart was touched by the thought of the terrible loneliness of an ascetic life to a man of his social, enthusiastic temperament. Who could judge the strength of the temptation to which he had succumbed? And once in the grasp of the fatal curse, was not

the conscious madman, doomed to be the destruction of the life he loved, even more to be pitied than his victim? She knelt at his side, and with her handkerchief wiped the death-dews from his forehead.

"Indeed, I forgive you," she said, with a little sob. "I am so sorry for you, Sir Rawdon; you must have suffered so terribly. I understand that you would not have been cruel to us of your own free will."

A sudden light of hope kindled in the dying face.

"You forgive me?" he murmured. "You mean it, child, after all I have done to you and those you love?"

"I forgive you with my whole heart," she said, "for I am sure you did not know what you were doing."

"Then"—and Sir Rawdon's voice broke out with a strange, triumphant ring,—"perhaps the Abbé is right, and God is merciful after all."

With a yearning, wondering look, his dim eyes turned from the pitying face of the girl by his side to the glory of the sunrise in the eastern sky, and there was silence, broken only by a low sob from Winifred, and the voice of the priest, who had returned to kneel and pray for the peace of the parting soul. Suddenly, to the amazement of the doctor, the dying man raised himself to a sitting posture, and tried to hold out his arms.

"Lilias!" he cried, in a strong, glad voice, while a rapturous light shone for a moment in his eyes. "My wife, my darling! and I did not kill you! Ah! thank God! thank God!"

His head fell back, and with reverend hand the Abbé gently closed the lids over the wide dead eyes, which would never open to the sunrise more.

CHAPTER XXVII.

An Auto da Fe.

AYEAR passed by, bringing round the anniversary of the June day on which Sir Rawdon Daubeny died, and Winifred was driving home from the country churchyard to which she had gone to lay a flower-wreath on the vault. She was leaning back on the seat of the phaeton, having resigned the reins to Gerald, who had positively forbidden his wife to attempt the exertion of driving her spirited pair of ponies. Only a month previously a very important event had taken place at Lynsccombe Towers, and, after the lapse of more than half a century, an heir had again been born under the old roof. Winifred's pride and delight in her baby are not to be told, while Gerald firmly believed that such a wonderful and interesting infant had never been seen in the world before; and as his opinion was entirely shared by Mrs. Daubeny and the old servants, the household at The Towers had resolved itself into a temple of worshippers prostrating themselves before the newly-risen star.

Strange to say, however, Lady Daubeny was not discussing the baby on this bright summer afternoon, as the ponies trotted smoothly homewards through the park. Her thoughts had gone back to the old French chateau, and the tragedy which had been enacted under its walls "a year ago on that very day." She was recalling what the Abbé had told her of the upright, simple life which the dead man had led until his fatal passion for the artist's daughter had broken down his self-control, and yielded him a prey to the intermittent fits of insanity, the fatal inheritance of his mother's

family. To what extent this hidden madness had coloured his actions, and how far he was to be considered a responsible being, it was impossible to tell, but the Abbé had bidden the lovers remember the spotless record of his earlier years, and forbear to judge a man crushed under the horrors of a curse which alienated him from all his race.

"What is the matter, Mignonette?" asked Gerald, surprised at his wife's unusual silence. "How grave you are looking, child!"

"I was thinking of this day last year," she answered, "or rather of the day before. I wonder whether you or I, Gerald, went through the worst time? I never knew how much you loved me till you arrived that morning at the convent, and just took me in your arms and said nothing; but you looked —oh, my darling, I knew then how you would have looked if you had come to find me dead!"

A shadow clouded the young man's handsome face.

"If I had been at home when you were carried off, no one knew how or where, I believe I should have gone mad. Of course, it was some comfort reading the Abbé's first telegram, which, you know, reached Beechhaven before I did; but I don't care to think of the night and morning on board that wretched crawling tug. Good Heavens, how it crawled! and I could do nothing but walk up and down the deck and picture what might have happened to you. I was never nearer madness in my life."

"It was so lucky you came straight to La Ferrière; the *père* told me you would when he took me there in the early morning, and oh! how thankful I was to find myself back in the dear convent, after that horrible Chateau Noir. There never were such good, kind people as the *mère* and the sisters."

"Take care," said Gerald, with a smile; "that is a sore subject, my Nixie. You know I am horribly jealous of La

Ferrière and Sœur Melanie. I hope the boy will serve as an anchor; but if you are ever missing, I shall know where to look for you."

Winifred laughed contentedly. She was too happy to let her mind dwell long on painful reminiscences.

"If you don't keep your word, and take me to see them every year, you will find me missing some fine day, I can tell you, sir, and the boy too. He can't learn too soon to be a sailor, as he has to go and see his grandpapa in Melbourne when he is three years old. Oh dear, that is a terrible undertaking. Do you think we shall ever accomplish it, Gerald?"

"We must, little one. I promised your father to take you, unless he should be able to bring them all home instead. I don't think he quite trusts me, Nixie; he is afraid I shall make away with you if I am not restrained by a wholesome awe of rendering accounts to him. You are such a mite of a thing compared to me;" and Gerald's expression as he smiled down at his pretty wife was certainly more lover than husband like.

"Father ought to consider the influence of mind over matter," returned Winifred mischievously. "I flatter myself I have got you very well in hand. Mother is quite surprised how amenable you are. It really is a tremendous responsibility, you and the boy together. Oh! Gerald," as her words were suddenly cut short by a kiss from her husband, "do behave yourself; we are just coming in sight of the house. When will you learn to be proper and dignified, like your ancestors in the hall?"

"They were not painted at thirty-one; and I am convinced they were not plagued with mischievous sprites of wives, or they would never have lived to be 'grave and reverend seniors.' If anyone wants protection, it is I," quoth Gerald feelingly. "By Jove! Nixie, there is the stable clock striking four. I shall have to be off at once to the station; and

do tell me—I have forgotten to ask you before—what is the good *père* to be called? I said something to Sloman this morning about the Abbé, and he thought I meant a building."

"Mother and I have settled all that," returned Winifred decidedly. "He used to stay here in old days, before he was naturalised in France and dropped his English name. He has never really altered it, I believe. Connois is only the French version of O'Connor. We must call him Mr. O'Connor to the servants. I am so very glad he is coming to us at last."

"He is not coming to see us; don't you flatter yourself, Mignonette. If it was not for this business to be settled, he would never have quitted La Ferrière."

"Never mind what brings him, so long as he comes. I think it is so good of you, Gerald, and just what poor Sir Rawdon would have wished, although he left no will: that all which came to him from his mother should be made over to the *père*."

"I expect to have Mr. Graham down on me for a bad Protestant, little one; but I shall be thankful to be quit of Chateau Noir, and see it turned into a Home for Consumptives. The *père* is a wonderful man, and I will put no limit on his powers if he prevents his patients dying from melancholy before the firwood air has cured their consumption. How my uncle could ever have lived in such a place passes my comprehension. No wonder he went mad."

"It was before he knew my mother that he lived there so much," said Winifred softly. "He liked to be alone, and within reach of the *père*. I think I can understand his feeling. Gruesome things had a fascination for him. There was always such a sad look in his eyes. I used to think the Towers a melancholy house when it belonged to him, and now it is as bright and cosy as our dear Beechhaven Cottage."

"Yes," said Gerald, as he checked the ponies under the portico, "there are certain advantages in having an elf for a wife, if one has to put up with her pranks;" and throwing

the reins to the waiting groom, he caught up Winifred before she could move from her seat, and carried her into the hall. "I need not ask which way," he added, turning towards the staircase; "to the nursery, not the studio, I suppose?"

"Certainly; but, Gerald, do put me down. You know I can walk now as well as you can. The servants will think you crazy."

"Let them. I am going to take care of my fairy now I have got her;" and not until he reached the door of the apartment sacred to the small heir of the Towers was Winifred suffered to regain her feet.

Of course Gerald followed her into the room to ascertain the important fact as to whether his son were waking or sleeping, and when at last Winifred had made him realise the time, and fairly shut the door upon him, he tore down the stairs and into the waiting carriage at a pace which caused the old butler to seek out Mrs. Bunser and confide his opinion that "Sir Gerald really behaved exactly like a boy; he ought to consider what was due to himself before the footmen."

"Never mind the footmen," said Mother Bunch, smilingly. "It does my heart good to see the dear boy as happy as the day is long. I remember the time when he was old enough and grave enough to suit anybody's fancy. If you would like those days back, Mr. Sloman, I shouldn't; so, if you please, we will agree to differ."

"Still, for the head of the family——" began the butler, when his reply was cut short by the entrance of a visitor, no other than the landlady of "The Duke's Head" Inn, who was greeted by Mrs. Bunser as an old acquaintance, and informed that her ladyship would see her at once.

"I'll take you up myself," said the housekeeper, always glad of an excuse to visit the nursery; and Mrs. Rudd was straightway ushered into the room, where Winifred received her with the warm welcome she had always accorded, since

her arrival at the Towers, to the woman who had loved her dead mother, and proudly exhibited the baby to the admiring gaze of the visitor and Mother Bunch.

When the housekeeper retired, and the child was carried off to be dressed by its nurse, Winifred turned to her visitor, an evident question in her eyes.

"It's all right, my lady," said Mrs. Rudd promptly. "We had to wait until the wood was dry and the wind set away from the house, and then we made a bonfire big enough to be seen for miles round, and the old clock on the top burnt as if it was made of pitch. It was a queer thing, too, I must say; the day had been cloudy and sultry, but the flames had hardly caught it before there came a flash and a clap of thunder that made me jump. I was afraid a storm was coming to put out the fire, but never a drop fell, and the clock was burnt to a cinder, so you may set your pretty head at rest, my lady; there is no more harm can come to you and yours from its ugly face, though, mind you, I don't believe a word of the old stories—a better clock never ticked."

"I hope you will find the new one equally good," said Winifred with a little smile. "Have you got the painters out of the house yet, Mrs. Rudd?"

"Not quite, my lady. I am sure we can't be thankful enough to you and Sir Gerald for all you have done for us. The old house looks like new, and I have got my rooms taken to the end of the summer; it is like the old days back again."

"I am so glad," said Winifred warmly; and she added with a laughing glance: "I told you your luck would come back if you put an end to the clock, Mrs. Rudd. When did the *auto-da-fe*, I mean the burning, take place?"

"Well, we had to wait for the wind, and one thing and another, till it came to the last day of May; and then I made a push for it, and got it done."

"The 31st of May, the day my boy was born!"

"That is how I remember it, my lady. We had the fire in the afternoon, and in the evening one of the grooms stopped with the news, and the fire had been out long before. There was nothing left of the old clock by the time the young master saw the light."

Winifred was silent, leaning back in her chair. Her husband might smile at her fancies, and assure her that the mysterious power of the old clock existed only in Sir Rawdon's diseased imagination, but she had felt she would know no peace while its mocking face still stood in the inn parlour. A weight seemed lifted from her mind, and she experienced an undefinable sense of thankfulness that it had been destroyed before her son was born. Winifred could never be brave where those she loved were concerned, and her imagination was already busy with hopes and anxieties for her baby's future.

A few minutes later the young mistress of the Towers, followed by the nurse and baby, was on her way to join Mrs. Daubeny in the garden. On her son's marriage the invalid had proposed remaining at Beechhaven, but neither Winifred nor Gerald would hear of such an arrangement. "It would not be home without mother," Winifred declared; and, indeed, on the first arrival at the Towers after their honeymoon, Mrs. Daubeny's presence had served more than anything else to dispel the nervous dread of her future home which had secretly haunted the young wife's mind. With Elliot as her maid, and a footman always in attendance to wheel her couch, Mrs. Daubeny thoroughly enjoyed the variety and change offered by the grand stately house; and when the lift was made which Gerald had ordered to convey his mother's couch to the upper floor, that she might be able to visit her grandson's nursery, the invalid felt that she would have nothing left to wish for. She was watching for the baby now, when the little group came across the terrace, Winifred

looking her prettiest in a pale-pink tea-gown with some soft dark feather trimming about her throat and wrists, the dogs leaping before her, and the nurse and baby following behind. The collie had been disposed to resent the advent of a rival in his mistress's affections, but he was a dog of a confiding nature; and when Winifred had laid her soft hand on his glossy head, and, looking into his golden-brown eyes, assured him that new friends should never make her forget old ones, he had wagged his intelligent tail, and proceeded, somewhat to her dismay, to offer his allegiance on the spot by promptly licking the baby's face.

"What a perfect day it is," said Mrs. Daubeny, when she had duly performed her rites at the infant's shrine, and the nurse had borne him off for a constitutional in the garden. "Your *père* will hardly be able to throw English weather in our face this afternoon."

"He is not given to throwing anything in people's faces," answered Winifred with a smile. "You forget he was English himself, or rather Irish, before he renounced his country."

"I never could understand why he renounced his country, and did not tell Gerald who he was," returned Mrs. Daubeny impatiently. "You never will hear a word against your friends, my dear child, and I am sure we can't be grateful enough to him for saving you last year; but I do think it was very ridiculous to make such a mystery of himself."

"Wait till you see him, mother. I understand it very well," said Winifred quickly. "He wanted to break off with his old life, and Sir Rawdon was his only near relation. He kept up with him until Sir Rawdon was ashamed to meet him. You know he never went near La Ferrière or mentioned his uncle's existence after he married Liliás. There was no need for the *père* to tell Gerald who he was, especially when Sir Rawdon had practically disowned him."

"French sentiment, I suppose," said Mrs. Daubeny, lifting her eyebrows. "I fear I am too English to understand it ——"

She broke off as she saw Gerald approaching with his guest, the Abbé moving with his usual quiet dignity, his slight figure, in its long *soutane* and low-crowned beaver-hat, offering a curious contrast to the imposing proportions of the young master of the Towers, arrayed in a white flannel suit and dark-blue cap and blazer. Winifred started forward to meet them; it was nearly a year since she had seen the Abbé, and she was full of eager questions concerning her friends at the convent. After a time, when the arrival of the tea-tray engrossed her attention, he began talking to Mrs. Daubeny, whose prejudices vanished at once before the charm of the Abbé's manner.

"I have just had a telegram from Mr. Villiers," said Gerald, sitting down beside his wife. "He is actually coming by the next train, so he must have got over his alarm at meeting you; or, perhaps, he thinks the boy's advent will have softened your heart."

"Well, I have not exactly pleasant associations connected with our last meeting; but I don't feel in a mood to be hard upon anyone, certainly not poor Mr. Villiers," said Winifred with a smile. "Did you call at the post, Gerald?"

"Yes, and here is a letter for you—I quite forgot it—from Nellie, I think."

Winifred glanced at her guest, and seeing he was entirely absorbed with Mrs. Daubeny, proceeded to open and read the letter.

"What do you think?" she exclaimed suddenly. "Theo is engaged to an American girl in Paris—an heiress, Nellie says. Oh dear, I am glad! He was always a little on my mind, poor boy."

"I daresay she will take the nonsense out of him. Poor Theo, he is really not half a bad fellow! That was an

awfully nice letter he wrote me before our marriage. I will write and congratulate him this evening."

"Do, and give him my love and my very best wishes," said Winifred, "and baby's too," she added, as the nurse approached with the young gentleman, who was promptly taken possession of by his mother to be introduced to the Abbé.

The priest rose with a smile, not insensible to the charm of the picture made by the bright young mother with her child in her arms.

"The sisters envied me the sight of the baby," he said; "and the *mère* charged me to beg that you will bring him to La Ferrière before he has grown very old."

"I don't see why we should not bring him next month," said Winifred with an eager glance at her husband. "We are going to Beechhaven for a holiday. You know, *mon père*, that Gerald has bought the Cottage to run down to when we pine for sea-air and a sail in the new *Petrel*, and the big yacht is at Aylsmouth. Gerald has had her fitted with steam. Mightn't we take the boy over to La Ferrière, Gerald, on a very calm day? It could not hurt him."

"We will see about it," said Gerald with a smile. "We have first to go through the important ceremony of rechristening the yacht. Her old name is hardly appropriate to boilers and screw, not that we shall use them much. I prefer sailing; but I don't fancy risking my treasures entirely at the mercy of the winds."

"What shall you call her?" asked the Abbé, smiling as he watched the expression with which Gerald's grey eyes were resting on his wife and child.

"*The Nixie*," answered Gerald. "I wanted her called *The Elf*, but Lady Daubeny does not think the name euphonious, so I have meekly given in as usual. You behold in me, *mon père*, the model of an obedient husband."

"Monsieur knows better," said Winifred with a laugh. "I

can assure you, *mon père*, I had chosen a most sensible, suitable name, and nothing would induce Gerald to agree to it. I tell him it is quite superfluous to christen our boy if he gives him as many nicknames as he has bestowed on his mother."

"You have heard the infant's name?" observed Gerald.
"He is to be called after my father, Launcelot Gerald."

"There again," struck in Winifred with a pout, "I wanted Gerald Launcelot; but I am never allowed to have my own way in anything—am I mother?"

"Ahem!" coughed an unexpected voice; and turning quickly, Winifred found herself confronted by the well-remembered face of Mr. Villiers, who had advanced unheard over the grass towards the group under the cedar. For a moment the blue sky, the summer sunlight, even the forms of her husband and child, vanished from the girl's eyes, and she saw only a stretch of cold, dreary corridors, dim with yellow fog, and the cruel, pitiless face of the bully to whose tender mercies the lawyer had consigned her.

"How do you do?" she said with an effort, recalling her wandering thoughts. "I am sorry I cannot shake hands with you, Mr. Villiers. Where has nurse gone? Do take the boy for me, Gerald; he has tired my arms already."

"All right, I'll find her;" and as soon as Gerald had greeted the lawyer and introduced him to the Abbé, he walked off with his son in his arms.

"You trust your husband with the baby, Lady Daubeny?" said Mr. Villiers in some surprise. "You are more confiding than most young mothers."

"You see I know my husband's capabilities," she answered, seating herself behind the tea table as she poured out the new comer's tea. "Will you help yourself to strawberries, Mr. Villiers? the cream is on that little table." And she added with a glance, half serious, half mischievous, as he took a seat at her side: "May I venture to ask if you have

forgiven my obstinacy at our last meeting, or am I still in disgrace?"

She looked so bewitchingly pretty as she asked the question, that the worthy old lawyer felt a trifle embarrassed.

"You should not have done it, Lady Daubeny," he said. "You are not going to expect me to approve of a piece of quixotism. '*C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre.*' However, I feel I owe you an apology for my rudeness on the occasion, as I certainly presumed on the privilege of having known you from a child; but I was really annoyed that Sir Gerald's sacrifice should all be thrown away."

"I know I was very provoking," said Winifred penitently. "Please forgive me, Mr. Villiers; I promise never to do it again."

"Hullo! little one," and Gerald's hands were placed on his wife's shoulders, as he leaned over the back of her chair, "what is the meaning of this surprising docility? I advise Villiers to look out for squalls, unless you are bent on convincing him of the truth of the statement you were promulgating on his arrival—that I am a desperate tyrant."

"If Lady Daubeny will allow me to express my opinion," remarked Mr. Villiers with a twinkle in his eye, "I must observe that my experience of her character would scarcely warrant me in believing that she does not obtain her own way—when she chooses."

"No," said Winifred, and a serious look stole for a moment over her beautiful face, "you are wrong, Mr. Villiers. I have always done what Gerald told me—always, except when I ran away from La Ferrière. You see, he and I are not quite like other people;" and with a little smile, she looked straight up into her husband's eyes. "It is not every man who buys his wife for £50."

THE END.

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